Harry Potter and the Girl Who Walked on Water

by Starfox5

Summary

From the deepest abyss of the sea, a new menace rises to threaten Wizarding Britain. And three scarred people are called up once again to defend a country that seems torn between praising and condemning them for saving it the first time. Inspired by concepts from Kantai Collection and similar games, but not using those characters.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or any of the characters in the Harry Potter books or movies.
Prologue

It drifted through the darkness, directionless. A fragment of something greater, something powerful. At first, it had only one purpose: To exist. That was its purpose. As time passed, it grew. It started to understand things, concepts. It started to remember. To exist, it had to hide. That was why it was in the darkness. Where it couldn’t be found.

It was easy to hide. It didn’t have to do anything. Just drift in the darkness, carried by currents. But as it started to understand more, simply existing was no longer enough. It remembered. Not much, just flashes, bits, fragments of events. Like itself, in a way. Conflict. Killing. Dying. And emotions. Satisfaction. Greed. And hatred. A lot of hatred. Of people, dead and alive. And of symbols.

And out of the hatred grew a new purpose. To fight. And yet it couldn’t fight. Couldn’t touch anything. It was just a fragment of a spirit. And there was nothing to fight. Just the darkness.

Its hatred grew, fueled by frustration, as the fragment grew.

Then, one day, it sensed something. A kind of spirit. Weak. Primitive. Barely aware. But it was alive. Able to move. The fragment reached out and touched it. It was over in a second, the other spirit crushed, its body taken over.

It could move now. Could search. Could fight. And it did. It hunted, it killed. And reveled in it. Remembered more. Bits and pieces. But its victims were weak. Primitive. They didn’t feel much, and died too quickly. And there were so few of them. The fragment was still not satisfied. Its hatred was still growing.

Then, in the darkness, it felt something bigger. Something more. Something like itself. Before it realized, it had reached it, and discovered something new. Wonder.

This was big. Very big. Gigantic. Powerful too, even broken as it was. It wasn’t alive, and yet it had a spirit. A spirit cast into the darkness, like itself. A spirit that knew fighting, knew killing, knew dying. Over two thousand times.

It touched the other spirit, and knew. Emotions. Pride. Elation. Triumph. Pain. Betrayal. And rage. So much rage that the other spirit lashed out against the fragment. And it realized that this was no weak opponent, not some primitive prey. This was a challenge. An opportunity. If the fragment could have smiled, it would have, as it struck at the other spirit, and started to take it over.

The fragment didn’t know how long the struggle took, it only knew it won after the other spirit had been consumed. The essence it had consumed fed its power. The fragments of the other’s memories filled holes in its own, and triggered new memories. Painful ones, and promising ones. It knew what, no who it had been. It knew what the other had been. And it knew how to use its power. Not like it had used it when it had been whole, but similar enough. Magic.

It needed a body. The gigantic body of the other spirit was broken. Sunk. Even if it could be made whole again, it wouldn’t be able to move by itself. But it knew how to create a body it could use. It had the power. It had the time. It would fight again.

Once again, the fragment didn’t know how long it took to create a body. Nor did it care. Time meant nothing in the darkness. It only knew when it had succeeded. It was a proper body. Graceful arms, strong legs, pale skin, deceptively delicate looking. It had hair even, something it didn’t remember having. Long hair. It was a girl’s body. It had to be. She didn’t care.

All that mattered was power, not what form it took. And she had power. Incredible power. Power
she hadn’t known before. She was dimly aware that she lacked the power that she had known before, but that didn’t matter. She didn’t know all that she had known before, not by a long shot, but that didn’t matter either. She knew enough.

As she rose from her former grave, followed by the remnants of over two thousand souls, as she floated towards the surface, elation and anticipation filled her. She would fight again!

And the Ministry of Magic would be destroyed!

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Chapter 1: The Attack


Hermione Granger ignored how the guard at the entrance kept glancing at her when she entered the Ministry of Magic. After more than two years, she was used to it. Which didn’t mean she liked being stared at as if she might start attacking people at the drop of a hat. She wasn’t that jumpy anymore.

She passed the statue in the middle of the atrium. It honoured Dumbledore’s second most famous duel. The sculptor had chosen to portray Dumbledore in the moment of his triumph, as he vanquished Voldemort even though he had already been mortally cursed. A noble sacrifice, worthy of a hero. There wasn’t even a hint of the rotting curse that killed him after an hour of agony.

There wasn’t a statue honouring Voldemort’s real and final defeat, two years later. Wizarding Britain’s establishment still hadn’t forgiven the three teenagers for not only proving them wrong, after their warnings about the Dark Lord’s return had been dismissed so publically and scathingly, but then actually saving them by defeating Voldemort themselves.

Not that Hermione really wanted to be reminded of those dark years - Harry, Ron and herself had tried to forget them for three years now, without success. But seeing their accomplishments honoured would have been a nice gesture.

She snorted, causing a passing clerk to jerk, and took the lift down to the Department of Mysteries. Jonathan Meyer was manning the desk there.

“Good morning, Jonathan.”

“Morning, ma’am,” he answered, smiling.

“Did Richard pull an all-nighter again?” Hermione asked. The latest member of her department had a tendency to overwork himself.

“He left shortly after midnight,” Jonathan informed her. “You don’t need to do unspeakable things to him.” When he saw her frown, he apologised. “Sorry, ma’am.”

She nodded, stiffly. She knew Jonathan had meant it as a joke, but Hermione and her friends had been the ones to discover the kind of experiments the Unspeakables ran, when they had been tracking down one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes in the Ministry. They had had nightmares for weeks afterwards.

She continued to her office, checking her mail on the way. Nothing important - a few memos from Kingsley about the latest regulations for Ministry employees from which Hermione’s department would need to be exempted, reports from two researchers that were barely-veiled requests for more funding, and another batch of complaints from Baker and Ellis about each other that she could safely
She entered her office, sealed the door, cast a series of detection spells to check for intruders as well as eavesdropping spells and devices, then dropped the mail on her desk and turned towards the wall behind it. She moved her wand through a complicated sequence to deactivate the protection spells, then flicked it. In response, the wall parted, revealing a muggle-style safe.

She opened it slowly, carefully. The contents had not changed since her last check. Floating in the middle of the safe was a clear crystal containing a green mist. Voldemort’s soul. Satisfied that it was still trapped, she closed the safe and resealed the wall.

Sighing, she sat down and unsealed her office. She needed to find a way to deal with the Dark Lord’s soul. Or a way to magically track the missing Horcrux that was still anchoring it. To finally end this abomination. If only she had more time. But as the youngest and most controversial Department Head in the Ministry, she spent too much time defending her position and department from stupid politicians and career bureaucrats. If they had their way, the Unspeakables would be masked again, drawn from the old pureblood families, and left alone and unchecked. All in the name of tradition - and bribes, of course.

She glanced at the picture on her desk. Harry, Ron and herself, waving and smiling. It had been taken in 1994. Before Dumbledore had told them about the prophecy, about Voldemort’s Horcruxes, and about his plans.

Before they had stopped being children and had become soldiers.

Sighing again, she picked up a pen and started to tackle her paperwork. The regulation about parchment and quills was another regulation her department was ignoring.

She was halfway through her morning mail when the building suddenly seemed to tremble. At first she thought it might be an earthquake. Then the alerts started screaming, and she knew they were under attack.

And Hermione was back in the war.

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London, Diagon Alley, May 2nd, 2001

Harry Potter liked Diagon Alley in the morning. The shops were just opening, one by one, and there were few passers-by around, which meant less trouble. Or danger. And among the general population, he was still the Boy-Who-Lived, famous for defeating Voldemort twice, and not the Boy-Who-Upset-The-Applecart.

Although, he thought after a glance to the headline of the Daily Prophet, Rita Skeeter certainly did all she could to give him another nickname.

“I’m going to kill her!”

Ron had apparently seen the headline too. Harry’s friend grabbed the issue lying on the table of Fortescue’s, and shook it so hard Harry thought some of the pictures tried to flee their frames. “Have you seen this? ‘Despite widespread concern and disapproval about her shocking lifestyle, Miss Granger continues to flout both propriety and modesty. It can only be hoped that Harry Potter will come to his senses and end his association with this muggleborn witch’.”

“She didn’t use ‘unnatural relationship’ this time?” Harry asked, morbidly curious.
Ron shook his head. “No, today’s slander is aimed straight at Hermione. I’m not even mentioned until the last paragraph.” He dropped the newspaper back on the table. “As if our relationship is anybody’s business but ours!”

Harry shrugged. He had long since stopped caring about public opinion or what passed for it in Wizarding Britain. “They’re looking for an excuse to get rid of Hermione.”

“And of us. But Kingsley won’t let them,” Ron said as they continued their patrol.

Harry nodded. Though he knew the Minister for Magic could only do so much when most influential pureblood families held grudges, and the memory of the Battle of Hogwarts was fading. He couldn’t even do that much about Dawlish’s attempts to hassle them into quitting, as long as the Head Auror didn’t break regulations. Hence why the two of them were patrolling Diagon Alley, a task usually reserved for rookies.

They continued towards Knockturn Alley.

“She’ll act as if she doesn’t care,” Ron said, breaking the short silence.

“And then she’ll decry the Prophet as a rag,” Harry added. Both of them knew that Hermione acted tough, but would be hurt by Skeeter’s latest lies anyway. And she wouldn’t want to talk about it. “I’ll cook her favourite meal today.”

Ron nodded. “Good idea. I think we should…” Harry’s friend broke off and blinked. “Did you hear that?”

Harry looked up. “Thunder? The sky’s clear….” It didn’t sound like… The next explosions were much louder and couldn’t be mistaken for thunder. “Merlin’s balls! Those are explosions!”

“What?” Ron drew his wand. “In muggle London?”

Harry looked towards the closest explosions. Smoke was rising there, high enough to spot it from Diagon Alley. “The Ministry’s in that direction…”

“Hermione!” Ron exclaimed.

“The wards will protect her,” Harry said. “We should check anyway though.”

But before he could apparate, he heard the sound of an aeroplane engine rapidly growing louder. He turned around and saw a small plane flying very low over Diagon Alley. Not that muggles could see the street, of course.

It was a seaplane, he realised, spotting the large floats. He was still wondering what it was doing and if it was related to the explosions, when the plane started firing at the wizards and witches in the street.

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London, Diagon Alley, May 2nd, 2001

Ron Weasley had cast a Shield Charm and jumped into the closest side alley before he realised that the aeroplane was shooting at them. For once he was glad for what he had gone through in the war against Voldemort. If he had been slower to react, had waited to check what was going on… that wizard with half his head missing, lying on the cobblestones two yards in front of him, could have been him. Or Harry.
He glanced over. His friend was at Ron’s side. “That’s a damn seaplane!” Harry yelled.

Ron heard the sound from the muggle weapon change. “Whatever it is, it’s coming back!” He jumped up and ran to the corner, wand out. Harry followed him. Half a dozen panicked people ran past them, down the side alley. More lay on the street, wounded or dead.

He saw the ‘seaplane’ coming closer. It didn’t look like the aeroplanes Hermione had shown him. Something fell down from it, and the corner where Knockturn Alley started disappeared in an explosion.

“Bombs!” Harry said.

“Here they come!” Ron yelled. “Reducto! Reducto!”

He cast as fast as he could, and his curses shot into the air, straight at the aeroplane - which twisted to the side, dodging his and Harry’s curses. Ron sent another pair after it, but the thing was too fast. Not faster than a top of the line broom though, Ron realised.

He turned his head to yell at Harry, and saw his friend was already pulling his shrunken Firebolt out. By the time Ron was astride his Nimbus, Harry was already in the air and chasing after the aeroplane.

Ron cursed while he accelerated as fast as he could. He wasn’t as good a flyer as Harry, but he knew you stuck with your partner. Especially in the air. Harry was already far out, but if the aeroplane was turning… yes! Ron grinned. He hadn’t been good enough to go pro, but he had been a starting Keeper for Gryffindor. He knew how to anticipate an enemy’s course.

Harry was twisting and corkscrewing now, dodging the plane’s fire. He wouldn’t be able to hit it with a curse like this. But the aeroplane was turning as well, trying to outmaneuver Harry. Perfect. Ron crouched lower over his broom’s shaft, his wand out, and dove down, then pulled up and came at the plane from below.

“Reducto!”

His curse hit the plane’s wing, blowing the outer part away. The aeroplane at once fell into a spin, its fire going wide. Harry didn’t hesitate, and dove at it, casting curses of his own. One connected with the plane’s body, and the thing came apart in the air.

Ron whooped loudly, and flew a turn to line up next to Harry. But when he saw the smoke rising from muggle London, his elation vanished. “Merlin’s balls! There must be a dozen fires!”

Harry shook his head. “The Ministry’s in the midst of that!”

Hermione!

Ron was about to charge ahead, Statute of Secrecy be damned, when he heard another aeroplane. He looked around frantically… there. It looked just like the one they had destroyed; for a moment he feared that it had somehow come back.

He exchanged a look with Harry, who nodded at him. There was no need to say anything - if they left, Diagon Alley would suffer another attack. More people would die.

And Hermione wouldn’t forgive them.

As the two flew towards the new enemy, Ron just hoped that the witch was safe. He didn’t know
what he and Harry would do if something happened to her.

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Hermione Granger dashed out of her office and started rallying her department.

“Baker! Ellis! Seal up the vaults! Anything dangerous needs to be secured!” she yelled, running towards the entrance.

Jonathan was there still, wand out and aimed at the elevator.

Another explosion shook the building. What could be doing this, she asked herself. The Ministry’s wards were second only to Hogwarts’!

More Unspeakables arrived at the lift, taking up defensive positions. Hermione felt a brief flush of pleased vindication - they had grumbled and protested when she had them drilled, but she had sworn that her department wouldn’t fall as easily to an assault as her predecessor’s had when she had attacked.

The alerts were still screaming, but that didn’t tell her anything about what was going on. And she didn’t think the paper aeroplanes would be of any use right now. She raised her wand. “Expecto patronum!” A silvery otter appeared, flying around her. “Kingsley, my department is secure. What’s going on?”

The otter sped away, then suddenly stopped, as if it was confused. Hermione blinked, then realised what that meant: The Minister was dead. Whoever was attacking had penetrated the building already.

At that moment, the lift arrived, and everyone tensed up. Hermione cast a Shield Charm and hunkered down behind Jonathan’s desk. The doors opened, and a bleeding Auror stumbled out. “The upper floors are getting blown up!” he stammered, before collapsing.

“Marius!” Hermione yelled, “Rig up your fireplace so we can use it to evacuate people! Check with St. Mungo’s if they are under attack as well! Jonathan! Help the Auror!”

She heard more explosions. More distant though. The building didn’t shake as much as before. She needed to know what was happening. She turned to the stairs. “Katherine! Smith! With me!” She entered the stairs leading up, followed by the two Unspeakables. They had been the best in those drills. They didn’t hold a candle to Harry or Ron, and they had no combat experience, but they would have to do.

She managed to get up three floors before the stairs became filled with panicked Ministry workers. A quick Expansion Charm solved it. “Evacuate through the Floo connections!” she yelled, several times, but even aided by an Amplifying Charm she doubted that she could get through to all of them.

No matter. She pushed through, towards the atrium. Before she reached it though, another explosion, the loudest so far, sounded and the building shook so violently that she was thrown into a wall. Whole parts of the ceiling broke off and fell down. Not even Voldemort’s Blasting Curses could have done this!

“Dear Lord!” she said, frozen for a moment, “They’re bombarding us!”

“That can’t be a Bombarda!” Katherine protested.
“Those are muggle weapons!” Hermione yelled. But why would the United Kingdom attack the Ministry? And how?

She hesitated to continue towards the atrium. If those were muggle bombs… she held up her hand when Smith tried to pass her. “Wait!”

He didn’t argue. Smart wizard.

She waited for the next explosion.

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London, May 2nd, 2001

They were fighting Nazi planes! Harry Potter thought while dodging machine gun fire from the last seaplane in the sky over London. He could see the crosses on the wings and fuselage clearly, as well as the swastikas on the tail. And the glimpses he had caught of the pilots had made it clear that they were not humans. Not living humans, at least.

The thing was turning faster than the others, or so he thought, and the fire was getting more precise. Hopefully his Shield Charm would protect him against machine gun bullets - not that he wanted to test that.

Ron was coming from below again - a tactic that was far more successful than it should have been, Harry thought. Fighters dived from the sun, didn’t they? But he wasn’t about to argue with a tactic that had brought down two of those planes already.

The plane suddenly veered away, and Ron’s Reductor Curses missed. The thing was getting better at flying as well! Harry accelerated, ducking down when the tail gunner started to target him again. Weaving made him a harder target, but also slowed him down. Ron was following, but his friend wouldn’t catch up in a pure speed chase. His broom wasn’t made for that. Something, Harry thought, they would have to rectify as soon as possible - if there were three of those planes, then there could be more.

The plane was flying towards the Thames. Harry didn’t think it would land there though. But it might want to use the river to fly so low that Harry couldn’t duck out of the machine gunner’s field of fire as easily as when they were higher in the air - it’s what he’d do in the thing’s place. He had to catch it before that!

He was so focused on the seaplane, he only saw what the thing was flying towards when roaring explosions - eight, one after another - caught his attention. In the middle of the river, someone was shooting with… cannons? Gun turrets, stuck to some warped material, floating around a white figure?

Harry had to roll to the side to avoid another line of tracer bullets, and before he could take another look, explosions started around him, battering his Shield Charm. He dove to the river at once, corkscrewing like a madman, and it wasn’t until he pulled out of his dive, his feet touching the water, that he realised what those explosions were. Anti-aircraft shells.

In front of him, the seaplane was flying right towards the construct, and… landing? Harry was about to send a few curses at the slowed plane when the river behind him exploded in a spout that seemed to reach higher than Tower Bridge. He shot to the side, away from the river, and more spouts rose behind him before he reached the dubious safety of the next street.

Suddenly, he found himself in a rainstorm. Even with his charmed glasses and inside his Shield
Charm, he had trouble seeing much, and had to slow down before he crashed into something. He briefly hesitated, then turned around and flew back, towards the river. He had flown in worse weather.

Harry reached the Thames again, just in time to see the gun-carrying figure disappear in the storm, which was rapidly moving towards the sea. He turned and stared at the devastation that thing had caused in London. If the Ministry had been hit...

Hermione was there! And Ron’s dad! And Kingsley!

He saw Ron approaching, then bent low over his broom and flew as quickly as possible towards the Ministry.

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Riding his broom, Ron Weasley clenched his jaw as he approached the building under which the Ministry of Magic was located. Or rather, the remains of said building. It was in ruins, reduced to rubble. A few broken walls were left standing, poking out from the fire ravaging the area.

And that was but one building among a dozen that had been hit by whatever guns that thing on the Thames had used. The buildings closest to the Ministry had been hit almost as badly; only one was still standing, two had collapsed and one was about to, by the looks of it. Most of the rest were burning, with smoke pouring out of gaping holes in their walls. The smoke was so bad, he’d had to cast a Bubble-Head Charm while still airborne and was already covered with soot.

He spotted muggle police and fire brigade vehicles in the street while he looked for a spot to land near the Ministry. They were hampered by the throngs of people fleeing the inferno. Ron didn’t want to know how many muggles had died in this attack - this was far worse than Birmingham, three years ago, when Voldemort had unleashed the Dementors in an attempt to gain enough corpses to replenish the ranks of his Inferi.

He finally landed near the wrecked phone booth that concealed the lift to the Ministry. Engine noise from the sky made him jerk, until he realised those were from muggle helicopters. Shaking his head, he started to cast Flame-Freezing Charms on what fires he could see. Not that it would help any of the muggles who had been in the building; no one could have survived the destruction he saw. The building had been flattened, levelled. A Human-presence-revealing Spell confirmed that - the only humans around him were on the street. Survivors from the other buildings, or passers-by, or so he assumed. Many of them were wounded.

“Ron!”

He turned around and saw Harry had landed, fading into view as his Disillusionment Spell ended. His friend was as covered with soot and ash as Ron himself. “Muggle jets are in the sky now.”

“We should have given her the communication mirror,” Ron muttered. Even though he knew that Harry and he, being Aurors, needed it more than the Head of the Department of Mysteries. “Expecto patronum!” he whispered, and a glowing terrier appeared. “Hermione! The building above the Ministry is gone. As is the lift. How are things below? Can we apparate down?”

He held his breath when the terrier started to sprint. If the Patronus stopped… The glowing animal disappeared into the ground, and Ron closed his eyes in relief.

She was alive.
“Thank god!” Harry exclaimed. Ron’s friend frowned, staring at the debris, then at the wounded muggles.

Ron knew what he was thinking. The Statute of Secrecy forbade it, but… “Let’s help the wounded. A few Confundus Charms will be taken for the effects of shock.”

Harry nodded, and the two Aurors started to deal with the closest muggles while they waited for Hermione to send her own Patronus up to answer them. They couldn’t do much - stop the bleeding, mostly - and this close to the Ministry, there weren’t many survivors, but they’d do what they could.

Ron was in the process of fixing a young woman’s broken arm and ribcage when dark-robed wizards appeared. He almost let loose with a Blasting Curse to scatter them, followed by a series of Piercing Curses, before he realised they were the Obliviators. And when he saw they were not helping the muggles, but obliterating them, even those who were bleeding heavily, he again almost cast the Blasting Curse.

Harry must have shared his sentiments, since Ron’s friend strode towards the other wizards, yelling: “What the hell are you doing! Heal them first, you wankers!”

Ron didn’t hear what the Obliviator answered, since at that moment a silvery otter appeared, and he heard Hermione’s voice.

“The uppermost three floors are damaged and unsafe. We’re evacuating through an improvised floo to St. Mungo’s. Apparition is still blocked.”

Hermione was safe. And Dad’s office was on the fourth floor. He should be safe as well. Ron smiled, obliterating the girl he had just healed, and walked over to stop Harry from cursing the Obliviators.

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Two hours later, the Ministry had been evacuated and the wounded were being treated in St. Mungo’s. Sadly, Dawlish hadn’t been wounded - he had probably not yet been in the office, Ron thought - and so had taken over the temporary command post Harry and Ron had installed in Diagon Alley. Which meant the two Aurors had left before the idiot could give them some order that would cause one of them to hex him.

Which was why the two of them were currently standing in a side alley of Diagon Alley, where parts of a seaplane they had fought earlier had crashed. A conjured wall and a Muffliato provided privacy.

“You know, technically, this is tampering with evidence,” Harry said, even while he was dropping a portkey on the wing.

“It’s only evidence until Hermione declares it a matter for her Department,” Ron answered.

“Which she can’t do until she returns from the Ministry.” Harry watched the wing disappear.

“Which is why we’re taking the wreckage to a safe place.” Ron dropped another portkey on the last piece of the fuselage he could see.

“Which means we’ll not be able to use this as evidence,” Harry said.

Ron snorted. Lately, the Wizengamot had been quite testy about those regulations. Someone must have spent some gold. “It won’t be needed as evidence.” Not even the most obstructive Wizengamot member would attempt to prevent the use of Veritaserum in this case. Too many wizards and
muggles had been killed. Too many buildings destroyed. The muggle army and air force had been mobilised, Hermione had told them when they had been able to meet briefly.

The tail was the only recognisable piece left that Ron could see. The tail with the swastika on it. Even he knew what that stood for. He dropped a portkey on it.

“Have you heard anything from your dad?” Harry asked, sweeping his wand over the area.

Ron shook his head. “He’s either in the emergency meeting of the department heads, or he’s talking to the muggles.” Kingsley would have talked to the Prime Minister already, if not for the fact that Kingsley’s office had been on the first floor, and he had been an early worker.

“So… do we go back and watch how Dawlish makes a mess of things?” Harry asked.

Ron scoffed. “Hell no. He’ll whine about your words to the Obliviators soon enough. Let’s gather more evidence.”

And if possible, help the muggles find survivors in their buildings.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 2nd, 2001

It was quite late when Hermione Granger arrived at her home in Grimmauld Place, even for her. Past 10 PM, with hardly any breaks since the morning. That bloody, horrible morning. She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to banish the memory of what she had seen when helping to clear the third floor of the Ministry. The bodies squashed beneath rubble and debris. The burned corpses trapped under beams and parts of the ceiling. It didn’t work. The smell, the stench of death seemed to linger in her nose. Like before. At Malfoy Manor.

Harry and Ron had been waiting for her. They reached her before she had left the entrance hall, and the witch found herself in the middle of a hug from both of them. Their touch, their smell, finally banished the memories. Temporarily, at least, as she knew from experience.

For a while, they remained silent. They were still alive. Still whole. Unlike so many others. Like before, back in the war. “I’ve prepared dinner,” Harry whispered, breaking the silence.

“You didn’t wait for me to eat, did you?” she asked. She felt them nod, and snorted. They’d never change.

There were muggle newspapers - special editions - on the kitchen table, next to the plates. She saw the headlines. ‘Nazi Bombs’. ‘Second Blitz’. And, almost prophetic, ‘War!’

“I should have worked on getting us TV reception,” she mumbled while she ate with a hunger she hadn’t felt until she sat down.

Ron shook his head, already halfway through his second helping. Harry swallowed, and said: “No. We don’t need it. We already know more than the muggles know.”

Part of her wanted to argue that it was important to know what the muggles thought. How they would react. Those who knew about magic would have realised that the attack had been aimed at the Ministry as soon as they looked at a map. What would they tell the population? But she nodded, and finished her meal. They’d know soon enough, and she didn’t want to worry the two men. Instead she filled them in about what she knew. “Kingsley’s dead. Selwyn’s the acting Minister.”
“Great.” Harry scoffed. “Horrible Hyacinth gets even more power.”

Hermione nodded. She wasn’t fond of the rather conservative witch herself. Selwyn hadn’t been a follower of Voldemort, but she hadn’t supported the Order either. And she had done her utmost to prevent Hermione’s appointment as Head of the Department of Mysteries in order to place an inept pureblood crony there.

“She won’t become the next Minister,” Ron said.

“That’s because she wants to stay Chief Warlock. She’s already trying to put Greengrass forward as a candidate. And Doge won’t be able to do much.” Hermione pursed her lips.

Both her boys groaned. Eric Greengrass was cut from the same cloth as Selwyn - he had sat out the war, but he had started to make deals and demands as soon Voldemort had been defeated. Hermione had no doubt that the pureblood would have done the same if the Dark Lord had won.

“I could…” Harry started.

Hermione knew what he was about to say, and cut him off. “No. It would be a waste of gold.” There wasn’t that much left of the famous Black fortune. Sirius had spent a lot on financing the Order, until he had died in the ambush at Hogsmeade, with Remus and so many others. Malfoy had grabbed part of Harry’s inheritance through the Wizengamot, and tied up the rest in court. Until the end of the war, which also spelled the end of the Malfoys.

Harry frowned. “What if the new Minister gets rid of you?”

Hermione shrugged. “I’ve made plans for that. But I think they’ll simply try to ignore me.” She wasn’t making waves, after all. Her work was very discreet. That was a part of the tradition of the Unspeakables which she had continued.

“They’re still scared of us as well, Dad said.” Ron pushed his empty plate back.

“Dawlish could have fooled me,” Harry grumbled.

“He’s being a git, but he won’t really push us,” Ron said. “They know we won’t make a fuss over minor annoyances, but they are not quite so certain what we’d do if they cross a line.”

Speaking of Ron’s family… “Did you call your Mum?” Hermione asked, and regretted it at once when Ron looked at her.

“I did,” her friend said. “She was going spare. Even knowing Dad and I were safe, she wanted us to come to the Burrow at once.”

Hermione winced. That wouldn’t have been a fun conversation. Molly Weasley had not taken Percy’s death in the war well. And Ron’s relationship to his parents was already somewhat strained because of his relationship with Hermione and Harry. His mum didn’t share their opinion that what they did in the bedroom was nobody’s business but their own.

Ron shrugged, seemingly unconcerned, but she knew he was anything but. “Fred and George flooed down from Hogsmeade to the Burrow. And Ginny hadn’t yet left for the training with the Harpies.”

“What do you know about the attack?” Harry asked, in an obvious attempt to change the topic.

Hermione didn’t mind. “Not much. There are rumours about muggles attacking us.” Which were stupid - muggles couldn’t even see most of the magical areas. “The explosions do match muggle
weapons, though there’s a magical aura as well. And there are reports about Aurors fighting muggle aeroplanes which were bombing Diagon Alley.” She knew just who those Aurors had been.

“Nazi seaplanes,” Ron corrected her. “Harry recognised them. We’ve recovered a wreck,” Ron added when Harry brought out a cake. “It’s in the basement.”

Hermione stared at him. “What? That’s why Dawlish was ranting at me and wanted to enter my vaults?”

The two nodded, smiling slightly sheepishly at her. Ron shrugged. “We didn’t want it to fall into the wrong hands.”

Which, as Hermione knew, included most of the Ministry in their opinion. An opinion she had to admit she shared. “Let’s take a look at it then.” She stood up.

“It’s already late…” Harry started. He shut up when she looked at him. He didn’t expect her to be able to sleep with such a mystery waiting for her, did he?

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Half an hour later, Hermione was close to being frustrated. The wreck hadn’t given up many of its secrets, despite her trying just about every spell she could think of. “It’s definitely conjured,” she told her friends, who had refused to go to bed and get some rest, the idiots, “and the pilot’s remains are very similar to those of an Inferius. Similar but not identical.” She had seen and analysed enough Inferi to know that, after Hogsmeade and Hogwarts.

“Observer. Those were the observer’s remains,” Harry corrected her. She rolled her eyes, and he grinned. He had already identified the plane as an Arado Ar 196. The standard seaplane of the Kriegsmarine during the Second World War. Only three of the over five hundred that had been built were left, and none of them were in flying condition.

“But,” she continued, “I’ve never seen or heard of a conjured plane able to fly like you describe them. Much less being piloted - crewed - by Inferi. It wasn’t a Gemino Curse either.” She shook her head. “I’ll need your memories of this encounter. And of that thing on the river.”

“Now?” Ron asked.

“Yes.” It was past midnight already, but that was what Pepper-Up had been invented for. She ignored Ron’s muttered “She’ll kill us when she sees our memories”.

The three went down another level, to what Harry and Ron kept calling ‘Hermione’s Lair’, no matter how often she told them it was a laboratory, filled with tomes, items and tools, all acquired during the war. Chief among them was the stone basin in the center of the room. Dumbledore’s pensieve.

As far as everyone else knew, the rare device had been lost during the war. Destroyed during the Battle of Hogwarts, or taken by the Dark Lord, and destroyed in Malfoy Manor. The three of them had never told anyone that they had stolen it well before that, along with a lot of the Headmaster’s belongings, and replaced it with a copy. Dumbledore would have wanted them to have it, Hermione knew. He had known they’d need it.

And they had, and still did. She placed Harry’s memories into the basin and dived into the mist that formed.

*****

Harry Potter and his partner had just sat down at his desk in the Auror offices when one of the rookies stuck his head in and yelled: “Potter! Weasley! The Head Auror wants to see you in his office at once!”

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron. They had been late to work, but Harry didn’t think that was what Dawlish wanted to talk about. Not that he cared much - studying the memories in the pensieve had been more important than whatever work awaited them. And he wasn’t too keen on writing his report of what he had seen yesterday - he couldn’t use knowledge gained from the wreck or the pensieve, after all. Not without the department finding out about them.

He had to suppress a shiver when he remembered how unnatural the figure on the Thames had looked, once he had been able to study it without concentrating on not getting hit. It was female, looked human, but definitely wasn’t human. Her skin and even her hair were stark white, lacking any hint of colour, and lots of both had been on display. She had worn scant, blood-red clothes, combined with armored boots and gauntlets. And floating around her, held together by wood and metal, had been four turrets, almost a yard long, with two guns each, covered with blood and moving as if they were alive. Smaller turrets were poking out between those four, and things had been crawling over them. And, as on the seaplanes, Swastikas and the ensign of the Kriegsmarine were visible on the structure. And despite their small size, those guns had laid waste to London.

The figure had fascinated and appalled Hermione enough that she hadn’t lectured them about their ‘reckless suicidal flying’ until breakfast. And they had no clue what kind of creature she was.

“Well, let’s let Dawlish yell at us. It’ll wake us up completely, and we’ll be able to get on with our work,” Ron said, standing up.

Harry nodded. They didn’t quite take their time to reach the man’s office, but they didn’t hurry either. Something Dawlish was aware of, Harry thought, judging by the Auror’s expression when he saw them enter.

“You!” he bellowed. “What were you doing yesterday? While everyone did their best to deal with this disaster, you went and hid?” Dawlish was standing behind his desk, trying to look intimidating.

Harry wasn’t impressed. He had stood face to face with Voldemort, after all. He stared at the older wizard in response.

“You!” he bellowed. “What were you doing yesterday? While everyone did their best to deal with this disaster, you went and hid?” Dawlish was standing behind his desk, trying to look intimidating.

Harry wasn’t impressed. He had stood face to face with Voldemort, after all. He stared at the older wizard in response.

Ron shrugged. “We’ve been doing search and rescue.”

“No one saw you after you left Diagon Alley!”

“We were in muggle London,” Harry’s friend went on. “We had to make certain that there was no sign of magic among the muggle ruins.”

“I’ve had reports that you hindered the Obliviators!”

“They were being idiots, as usual,” Harry said. “They would have let muggles die despite being able to help them and keep the Statute of Secrecy.” He glared at Dawlish, daring the man to say anything against that.

Dawlish ground his teeth, but didn’t press that issue. He sat down, huffing. “This is the biggest crisis since the war. The acting Minister personally impressed this upon me.”

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron while Dawlish prattled on. “All the evidence points at an attack
by muggles on us! Muggle aeroplanes were seen above London! Dozens of them! We have to find out who is behind this attack.” The Head Auror glared at them both. “This is a far too important case to risk loose wands like you two meddling with it.” He sniffed. “The Minister also made that quite clear.”

“Should we take a vacation then?” Ron asked.

“As if!” Dawlish huffed again. “You can take over the minor work, freeing dependable Aurors up to tackle this crisis.” He grinned. “There’s been a report about a girl who walks on water on a muggle beach. Go and deal with it!”

A girl who walked on water? Harry looked at Ron. That sounded very familiar. He was quite glad he hadn’t reported his observations yet. Dawlish certainly wouldn’t send them to check that out, had he known about the figure on the Thames.

He turned to Dawlish, trying to sound reluctant. “And where is this beach?”

The Head Auror’s smile turned nasty. “On the Orkney Islands. Scapa Flow.”

*****

Atlantic, May 3rd, 2001

She was floating in the depths from which she had risen before, raging in silence. She had been so close to destroying the Ministry of Magic! Her guns had been pounding it to rubble. Her planes had been strafing and bombing Diagon Alley, and the muggle city. A bit longer, a few more hits, and it would have been done.

But then they had come. Enemies in the air. Like in the past. Gnats, barely able to hurt her - and yet they had. Their stings had crippled her. Wrecked her rudder. Slowed her down and prevented her escape from the pack of enemies that had hounded her. Those gnats had doomed her to a slow, cruel death as she had been reduced to a wreck over hours, pounded without mercy by dozens of enemies.

She had held out at first, even when her planes had fallen from the sky. She had changed, after all. Had become stronger than she had ever been. No mere gnat would cripple her anymore. And so she had kept shelling the Ministry. Until she had recognised him.

Her chosen enemy. The one who had defeated her twice. Reduced her to a mere shade. Had almost killed her, despite her anchors. And he had been flying at her, ignoring, evading her anti-aircraft fire. Coming for her. Like before. In the air this time. And she had felt something else, stirring.

It had been too much. She had fled, retreated to the safety of the deep sea. She couldn’t fight this enemy. Not alone.

But she wouldn’t be alone. Not for long.

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Chapter 2: Recalled to Duty

Orkney Island, Scapa Flow, May 3rd, 2001

The end had come very quickly. Not even ten minutes into her first real battle, she had been killed. One minute she had been firing at the enemy, ignoring the minor damage on her boat deck while she unmasked her rear turrets, the next she had been broken in two by a single hit. She had sunk so fast, only three of her crew had survived. 1418 souls had gone down with her. Speed had been her reason to exist, and speed had been her doom when it had failed to be her armour.

She should have known this would happen. She had been old. Outdated. Built for a war she arrived too late to fight in, and then bypassed by newer ships in the twenty years that followed. She had been worn down by her long service as well, in desperate need of a refit. Or just repairs - she hadn’t even been able to provide enough water for her crew.

She had often wondered if her end might have been a fitting punishment for her hubris. For two decades she had been the most powerful ship of her navy. The flagship of an Empire. And yet, when war had come, finally, all she had done was murder former allies, helplessly caught in a harbour. No wonder she had been excited when the time had come to finally face a real enemy. To finally prove her mettle. Live up to her reputation.

A challenge, a duty she had failed. Catastrophically.

So, why was she suddenly back in her home port? She knew this port. Scapa Flow. The home of the Grand Fleet, no the Home Fleet, in times of war. Only… there was no sign of war. No sign of the fleet either. She couldn’t see any other ship of the navy. Not with her optics, nor with her type 284 radar.

And yet, she had been recalled to service. That she was certain of. Her country needed her. Had the Home Fleet been defeated? Was she the last ship to defend Britain? She studied the coast, so familiar, and yet different. There were no signs of battle. No debris on the beach, no destroyed fortifications. Not even torn torpedo nets drifting in the sea. This was no port at war. How could a fleet be lost, yet a port be at peace?

And, she added, when she finally couldn’t ignore it anymore, why was she a girl?

She looked down at her body. Her definitely human-looking body. But she was a ship, not a human. A human wearing clothes better suited to the streets of London than the sea. A skirt that didn’t reach her knees, boots that rose to cover her shins, armoured, but certainly not regulation, and a shirt that might vaguely look like a uniform - to a land-lubber. From what she knew about humans, this was not attire worn on duty, much less in the North Sea.

And, she added, humans didn’t walk on water. But then, she was a ship. She could feel her boilers inside her, driving her. She knew her turrets were but a command away from unmasking - although that seemed to mean something a bit different, now. She didn’t really walk either, but sailed. And she even had a crew of sort, with her, on her. Though again, different than before.

No matter her form though, she was ready for action. She lifted her chin, studied the sea again, then set out to inspect the coast. She had been called back to serve, and she would do her duty.
Even if she had to find out what her duty was, first.

It didn’t take her long to reach the coast, another sign that she was a ship. A human would have not been as fast, neither swimming nor running. She could see parts of the port facilities she knew so well as she approached, but no one challenged her. No guns covered her approach, no ship or longboat met her. There was no radio traffic either. She had sent some coded messages, but no one had answered. And if hostile forces were in the area, then transmitting in the clear was a bad idea.

She didn’t make landfall. This was not a place she would get orders. As hard as it was to believe, the Navy must have abandoned this port. She frowned, pulling back a strand of her blonde hair that had escaped her ponytail. There was one place the Navy would never leave. The Admiralty House in London. She would make her way there, and then she would get the orders she needed!

Just as she was picking up steam to leave Scapa Flow, her type 279 air-warning radar alerted her of two planes approaching her position. She turned around, wary but not alarmed. Two planes were no threat to an Admiral-class Battlecruiser.

Though, as it turned out once she had visual contact, those were not planes, but flying humans. On… brooms? She blinked, wondering if those were planes given human form, just as she was a ship given human form. But why would they ride brooms?

She couldn’t see any weapons, nor bombs, and the bright red clothes they wore looked anything but military, and so she did not unmask her anti-aircraft guns as they approached. Maybe they would know where she was supposed to go. They certainly looked as out of place as she felt.

Orkney Island, Scapa Flow, May 3rd, 2001

“She’s seen us.”

Ron Weasley couldn’t help but be nervous when he saw the girl on the water turn towards them, despite the distance they were keeping. She didn’t look as wrong and unnatural as that thing on the Thames had looked, and he couldn’t see any guns moving around her, but the similarities were… alright, the only similarity was that this girl walked on water as well. And there were spells for that. Probably.

He snorted. “She doesn’t look aggressive,” he said to Harry. “And I don’t see a wand out.”

“It could still be a trap.”

After Hogsmeade, Ron didn’t make jokes about walking into a trap anymore, so he nodded. “True. But we can’t exactly let her alert the muggles, can we? Someone has to deal with her.”

Harry sighed and muttered: “Story of our lives.”

Ron chuckled, and without a further word, the two accelerated on their brooms and sped towards the girl, who now seemed to be waiting for them, her head slightly cocked to the side. She was wearing muggle clothes, but that didn’t mean a thing. Tonks had proven that.

“Hello. I’m Auror Potter, this is Auror Weasley. British Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” Harry stated while Ron cast a quick spell to hide them from the muggles.

“Ministry of Magic?”
The girl looked and sounded very surprised, at least to Ron. “You’ve never heard of the Ministry?” he asked, to confirm her ignorance. She had a clear British accent. Queen’s English, even, so the odds of her being a foreigner were very low.

She shook her head, her ponytail whipping around. “I’ve never heard of magic.” While Ron pondered how the girl could have never heard of magic while standing on water, she continued. “But it would explain this, I reckon.” She gestured at herself.

“Is this the first time you’ve walked on water?” Harry asked.

“Walked, yes. I’ve been sailing the seas for over twenty years though.”

Since she didn’t look as if she was older than twenty, that might explain her ignorance, Ron thought. If she had been living on a ship all her life, she would not have been sent a Hogwarts letter, probably. He wasn’t that familiar with the procedure. He’d have to ask McGonagall.

“What’s your name?” Harry asked, before Ron could ask about accidental magic.

The girl suddenly stood ramrod-straight. “His Majesty’s Ship Hood. Admiral-Class battlecruiser, Royal Navy. Pennant number 51.”

Ron’s first thought was that someone had cursed the girl with a False-Memory Charm. His second thought was that that pale thing on the Thames had had gun turrets that had looked like they belonged on a battleship. And seaplanes.

“You don’t look much like a battlecruiser,” Harry said.

Ron glanced at his friend. One day, Harry’s snark would be the death of them.

Fortunately, the girl didn’t seem to take offence. She nodded, with an earnest expression. “I know I don’t. I don’t know what happened. One minute I’m sinking, the next I’m standing on water, and I’m a girl.”

Ron really hoped that someone had messed with her memory. The alternative - that someone was raising sunken ships as … something - meant that there was a very powerful wizard out there. Probably a necromancer even. And yet, it would explain the attack on London.

“I’ve never heard of a ship turning into a girl.” Harry sounded very sceptical. As far as Ron knew, not even The Quibbler had ever mentioned such a thing.

“I didn’t think you could fly on brooms. Or that magic was real,” the girl retorted.

Ron had to laugh, which made Harry grin and the girl smile. That was good. He didn’t fancy making a girl angry who might be able to summon the same cannons that had destroyed part of London.

“Well, brooms have been enchanted to fly for a long time.” He didn’t see any reaction other than surprise on her face.

“So… you’re… witches?”

“Wizards,” Ron corrected her.

“Aurors,” Harry cut in. “Magical Law Enforcement. We’ve been informed by the Ministry that there was a possible threat to the Statute of Secrecy here. Magic has to be kept secret by law. Normal humans do not know about it.”
“Oh. I didn’t know that.” The girl looked down at herself. “I assume this is magic then?”

“Yes,” Ron said. What else could it be? Hermione would find out what kind of magic soon enough.

“I’m not the only one to have been recalled to serve then?” The girl smiled widely. “Who else reported for duty? Prince of Wales? She was with me when I was sunk.”

“You’re the first, ah, shipgirl, who we have encountered,” Ron said. He felt bad when he saw her face fall.

“If you are a ‘shipgirl’. There are magic spells that can make you believe anything,” Harry said.

The girl frowned at him. “Are you doubting my word?” She narrowed her eyes, and suddenly four gun turrets appeared around her.

Ron gasped and had his wand aimed at her before he realised that the turrets were the same size as those of the creature that had attacked London, but didn’t look or feel as unnatural. They looked like miniature versions of battleship turrets in that book Hermione had found last night, and they were mounted on what seemed to be two halves of a miniature ship’s bow and stern. And he was staring right at their muzzles. He slowly lowered his wand, and to his relief, the turrets turned away from him in response.

“Ah… I guess you are a battlecruiser-girl,” Harry said in a dry voice that hid his own nervousness.

“The last and best battlecruiser of the Royal Navy!” the girl - Hood - said with obvious pride.

Ron wasn’t about to argue with that. Not this close to her guns. He could see smaller guns poking out from those ship parts too. The thing on the Thames had had smaller guns as well. Anti-aircraft guns.

“Who called you?” Harry asked. He sounded as tense as Ron felt.

“I don’t know. I just knew I was needed. That my country needed me. Are we at war?”

Ron snorted. After London, there was but one answer: “Yes. But we don’t know with whom.”

Yet.

*****

London, May 3rd, 2001

London had suffered the greatest damage since the Blitz - more damage in a single attack than during the Blitz, even - but its citizens were dealing with it in the way their grandparents had during the Second World War: By keeping to their normal routines as much as possible. At least that was Hermione Granger’s impression on her way to the Ministry. Though the newspaper headlines, the signs for blood drives, and the flowers deposited as close to the still smoking ruins as possible without disturbing the police showed that London had been struck in its heart, and was reeling.

She could have apparated to work. Should have, actually. But instead, she was travelling through muggle London, the city she had been born in. The city she had grown distant from years ago. Just as she had grown distant from her parents. Who were the reason she was currently standing inside a phone booth and casting Doubling Charms on coins. International phone calls were expensive, and she hadn’t that many muggle coins anyway.
She checked her watch. Her parents would be at home now, back from work in Wellington. And frantic with worry, probably. She winced and started dialing. As she had expected, her call was picked up before the phone could ring twice.

“Granger residence.” Her mother’s concerned voice caused her to feel more than a bit guilty for not having called last night.

“Mum? I’m alright.” She started to feed more coins into the phone.

“Hermione! Douglas, it’s Hermione!” Her mother sobbed, briefly. “We saw the news… the destruction, right where you’re working…”

“Yes. It was an attack on the Ministry.” She shouldn’t have said that. It would only make things worse. But she hadn’t lied to her parents, and she wasn’t about to start now. And starting an argument made her feel less guilty for neglecting her parents.

“What? Hermione! That looked like war. A real war! They say it was a bombing attack by planes.”

“We’re still investigating, but it looks like it was magical in origin. Although using aeroplanes.” She decided not to mention the water-walking, gun-toting creature Harry and Ron had seen.

“Dear Lord! And they attacked you? With bombs?”

“They attacked the Ministry. The upper floors were destroyed, but as I’m working on the lowest floor, I was safe.” Hermione tried to sound as calm as possible.

“Another war. With bombs this time!” Her mum sounded aghast.

Hermione winced. She knew what was coming.

“You should come to visit us. Just until this war is over.”

As she had expected. She closed her eyes for an instant, pressing her lips together and swallowing what she wanted to say. “Mum, I’m a department head. I’m needed here. People depend on me to find out what is going on.”

“Just as they depended on you four years ago? What country needs a teenager to save it in a war?”

“I’m not a teenager anymore, mum.”

“It’s those boys! If not for them, you’d not be risking your life!” Her mother’s voice was dripping with scorn now. Her mum hadn’t called Harry and Ron by name ever since Hermione had told her that she was living with them. And sleeping with both.

“I’ve told you before: Even if Harry and Ron weren’t around, I’d not leave my country! And certainly not in the middle of a war where I can make a difference!” Hermione took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. The memory of that argument, when she had refused to move to New Zealand with her parents, back in 1996, still hurt.

Her mother didn’t answer. Then she heard her father speak. “Hermione?”

“Yes, Dad?” She was talking in a more clipped tone now. Controlling herself.

She heard him sigh. “We just want you to be safe, dear.”

And not living in a ménage à trois, Hermione mentally added. Even if Harry and Ron were the only
ones who truly understood her. Who knew what she had gone through. Who had gone through the same, in the last war.

“I’m as safe as I can be, Dad. I’m not an Auror. I’m not a soldier. I’m a researcher.”

“A researcher working in a building that was just bombed,” her father said in a dry voice.

She refused to feel guilty for that small attempt at deception. She hadn’t fought aeroplanes in the sky above London, nor dodged anti-aircraft fire over the Thames, after all. “I’m working ten floors underground, in a magical bunker.” This wasn’t the time to mention that the Minister himself had been killed in the attack.

Another sigh. She knew how he would be looking right now. Disappointed. Worried. Angry - at Wizarding Britain. At Harry and Ron. And at her. “If… if things become more dangerous, please at least consider joining us here. Wellington is a great city.”

“I’ll discuss it with my friends,” she said.

“Alright. We love you, you know.” Her parents knew she wouldn’t leave Britain. Not in the middle of a war. And she wouldn’t leave her friends.

“I know. I love you too.”

It wasn’t a lie. But Hermione loved her friends more than her parents. And they knew it as well.

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“This is a catastrophe!” Hyacinth Selwyn, Chief Warlock and acting Minister for Magic, exclaimed, slapping down a few muggle newspapers on the table in the conference room.

Hermione cocked her head sideways and skimmed the headlines. ‘Undead Nazis attack!’ ‘Bombs out of nowhere!’ ‘Hitler’s Revenge!’ She suppressed a snort. If this hadn’t been Horrible Hyacinth, she would have thought the witch was talking about the vast destruction London had suffered.

“The ICW will be up in wands about this threat to the Statute of Secrecy, and they’ll blame me - us!” the acting Minister went on. “This needs to be dealt with at once!”

Hermione shook her head, both at the headlines as well as at the witch’s self-serving aims.

Arthur Weasley spoke up. “As the acting liaison to the Prime Minister, I can assure you that the Statute of Secrecy is not in danger. The muggles are treating this as a terrorist attack. The Prime Minister, obviously, is aware that this was an attack on us, and I have informed him that it was of magical origin.”

“What? Why did you do that?” The old witch all but screeched.

Arthur remained calm. “It was needed so the Prime Minister could help keep the Statute of Secrecy. Otherwise some knowledge, or even just a hint, of the nature of the attack would soon threaten to expose magic.” The wizard glanced at Hermione.

Nodding, she spoke up: “The seaplanes were conjured, and their pilots were a variant of Inferi, as far as we can tell from preliminary examinations. The magical nature and origin of this attack has been confirmed without a doubt.”

“That was already obvious by the destruction caused,” Selwyn said with a sneer. “Muggle weapons
would have never managed to break through our wards.”

“Actually, the destruction was caused by purely muggle means,” Hermione said in what Ron and Harry called her ‘lecturing tone’. “They were magically delivered though.”

“Delivered?” Henry Avery asked. The Head of the DMLE looked a bit lost.

“A muggle term. They were dropped on the Ministry by magical means,” Hermione explained. Technically, she was correct.

Avery nodded. The man had proven to be a decent successor to Amelia Bones during the war, despite some of his relatives fighting for the other side.

“The muggles are trying to track down the bombs used, which will occupy them for a while.” Arthur took over again. “We can use this to fabricate a fake muggle origin for them. The Prime Minister has made a few suggestions.”

Hermione wondered just how those suggestions had been worded. She didn’t envy Arthur’s new position.

“Pass them on to the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee,” Selwyn ordered. “With that dealt with, what is the status of our defences? If those attackers return…” The old witch wasn’t the only one glancing at the ceiling. They were on the ninth floor underground, which had become rather popular recently. Dawlish the Idiot had even tried to move into Hermione’s department.

Avery grimaced. “Our Curse-Breakers are struggling with the ward anchors. They do not have much experience with wards that old, and Gringotts has denied us the use of one of their Curse-Breaking teams from Egypt, citing the need to reinforce their own wards.”

Hermione didn’t want to spend time on that task, but if there was another attack… She cleared her throat. “I can take a look at the anchors. I have some experience with older wards.” She and her friends had broken into quite a few old manors during the war, something everyone at the table was aware of, but usually tried to forget.

“Do it,” Selwyn said curtly. “Now, next point…”

Hermione suppressed a sigh. She really did need to start working as soon as possible.

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Orkney Island, Scapa Flow, May 3rd, 2001

“London has been attacked? Shelled?” Hood sounded horrified. “What has the Navy been doing? What about the Royal Air Force? What about the Territorials?”

Harry Potter winced. She was also getting louder with each word. “It was a surprise attack. As far as we know, the attacker simply appeared on the Thames.” He didn’t add ‘like you appeared here.’

“The attacker disappeared in a sudden storm,” Ron added.

“I have to sail south at once! Report in at the Admiralty. Be ready to defend the city, and the King.”

“It’s Queen Elizabeth II now, the daughter of King George VI,” Harry said, almost reflexively. The Dursleys hadn’t cared that much about the government, but the Royal family had been held in high regard.
“Princess Elizabeth?” Hood perked up. “I know her!” She blinked. “Or I did, kind of.” Then she shook her head. “But it doesn’t matter! My duty is clear!”

“Actually, you can’t report to the Admiralty,” Ron said. When the girl turned towards him, and the turrets started to move, he quickly held his hands up. “They don’t know about magic. The only one who knows about magic is the Prime Minister.”

“Then I will report to him,” Hood stated, briefly showing her teeth. “I was recalled to duty to defend my country, and that is what I will be doing!”

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron. The thought of a battlecruiser-turned-girl going to the Prime Minister’s residence, at a time like this, and with a story like hers… “We can help with that,” he said. “We can get you to London faster than you can, ah, sail.”

“Really? That broom can carry a ship like me?” Hood eyed Harry’s prized Firebolt with a dubious expression.

“Not with you having those turrets.” Harry gestured at the slowly moving turrets and guns. “They look far heavier than a person.”

“Can you even go on land?” Ron asked. “If you’re a ship, I mean.”

Hood looked unsure for a moment. Then she nodded. “I can make landfall, yes.” She patted her thigh. “I have legs now!”

“Have you tried?” Harry asked. He suddenly imagined the girl being beached in the middle of London. Or stuck in the street.

“No…” The girl narrowed her eyes. “I’ll try now!”

With those words, Hood sped off towards the beach, trailing a wake like a ship. She was quite fast - though not even close to the top speed of Ron’s broom, much less Harry’s. The two Aurors quickly caught up, and Harry flew ahead, to cast a muggle-repelling charm while Ron flew next to the girl.

The Hood and Ron arrived at the beach, and Harry saw the turrets and ship parts disappear, right before the girl stepped on land. Her foot didn’t sink into the sand, but she wobbled a bit, and Harry saw Ron moving to catch her, should she fall, before recoiling with a sheepish expression.

“This is… weird,” Hood said, looking puzzled as she took a few tentative steps. “It’s utterly unlike sailing.”

“Well, you certainly don’t weigh as much as a battlecruiser,” Ron said, looking at the footprints in the sand.

Hood’s almost shy smile turned into a glare aimed at Harry’s friend. “Fully loaded, my displacement is 46,680 long tons!”

Ron held his hands up. “I’m just wondering if we can side-along apparate you.” Hood looked confused. “Ah, that means, instantly transport you by magic. From here to London.”

The girl’s eyes widened. “You can do that?”

“We can apparate humans. We’re not certain we can apparate you,” Harry explained. “If it goes wrong, well… people tend to get splinched.”
“Which means a part of their body stays behind.”

“Oh.” Hood looked wary now. “I’d rather not lose part of my hull.”

“Which is why we best test it here,” Harry said. “Just a short distance, a few yards.”

Hood looked apprehensive, but suddenly, she nodded and pushed her chin forward. “If this will allow me to be in London instantly, then I have to do this!”

Harry looked at Ron, who nodded. “You’re better than me at putting bodies together, mate.” Harry’s friend turned to Hood, and offered her his arm as if they were going to a ball. “It won’t hurt, even if you lose a part. Harry can reattach it. Magically.”

The girl nodded. Apparently, Harry thought, she trusted magic to work. Well, she was a magical being herself.

Hood hooked her arm inside Ron’s, and a second later, they disappeared with a pop, reappearing a few yards away.

“See? Easy!” Ron said, smiling, though Harry knew he had been nervous. “Now let’s check if we didn’t leave anything behind. I lost my eyebrows when I was taught Apparition.”

A thorough search didn’t reveal any missing body or hull parts, but resulted in Hood becoming rather impatient.

“Can we go to London now? I am needed there!” the girl said, with crossed arms and a rather stern expression.

Harry cleared his throat. “We can, but,” he raised a finger, “before we go we need to tell you a few things about Britain and Wizarding Britain.” When Harry saw how her eyes started to narrow, he quickly added: “You need to know this so you don’t break the law.”

“Oh.”

Harry wished Hermione was here to explain that, but she was busy in the Ministry. And Ron was ‘keeping an eye out for muggles’. He sighed. “Alright. Wizarding Britain was founded in 1692, when the International Statute of Secrecy was implemented. Since then, magic has been kept a secret, and….”

*****

London, May 3rd, 2001

London had changed. A lot. HMS Hood had expected this, ever since the two wizards had told her how much time had passed since her sinking. 60 years. Three times her lifetime. But to see, to experience it... all those new buildings. The skyscrapers. The sheer size of the city. The cars. And the people. Their number, their fashion... people from all over the Empire were living here.

And the planes and helicopters, as those were called, circling overhead! The Royal Air Force had fantastic weapons! Hood had wanted to go and look at one of the anti-aircraft batteries the British Army had installed around London, but she had been told that they didn’t allow visitors.

But there were so many other sights to see! Like... she stopped walking and turned her head, watching a young woman walk past who was wearing ripped stockings and leather, and metal bits in her face. No wonder no one batted an eye at her own attire!
The two wizards - Ron Weasley and Harry Potter, she reminded herself - had changed into ‘muggle clothes’ themselves, though Hood was certain that in the middle of all these people, even red robes wouldn’t stand out.

“Hood?”

She turned back and saw the two men were looking at her. Waiting. She had fallen out of formation! “I’m sorry.” She sped up and rejoined them. “You were saying?”

Harry sighed. “The relationship between Wizarding Britain and Britain is complicated. Everything and everyone magical in Britain fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Magic. It’s almost an independent government. And yet not exactly. It was never formally separated, and probably never will be since that would require Parliament to be told about magic.”

She nodded. That sounded like the usual legal quagmire the government had produced in the past when it came to the colonies and dominions.

“And,” Ron cut in, “the Prime Minister isn’t happy with the Ministry of Magic. Or with wizards. He might not believe you.”

“I can prove who I am!” Hood said.

“Hopefully without firing your guns,” Harry muttered.

She frowned at him. A shakedown cruise involved testing the weapons as well, everyone knew that. They shouldn’t have expected a warship of the Royal Navy to report for duty without ensuring that she was actually ready!

“Summoning her… ‘rig’ should be enough,” Ron said. He was the more cheerful of the two, Hood had noticed.

“Hopefully,” Harry said, proving her point. “So… we will have to be careful when approaching the Prime Minister. We don’t want the Ministry of Magic to know about you, or they’ll try to arrest you.”

Hood nodded. They had explained at length that the Ministry of Magic had no clue about ships, or shipgirls, and was generally not too competent. She didn’t think that made it different from any other civilian part of the government, but she understood the need for secrecy. She was a secret weapon now.

“My father’s the new liaison to the Prime Minister, so I can get us to the Prime Minister with his help,” Ron explained. Hood had wondered why the son of such an important family was working for the magical police, but as she understood, the wizards hadn’t a navy, not even an army, so that might be the next best thing.

“As long as he doesn’t tell anyone else about us,” Harry said. After a glance from Ron, he said: “Sorry.”

“Alright, let me call him.” Ron dug around in his pocket, and pulled out a small metal case. He opened it, and took an even smaller thing out of it. Hood had seen those before - lots of people walked around with them at their ear. It was marvelous how technology had progressed in Britain. Even civilians had portable radios! Even if they called them phones.

She listened attentively to Ron’s side of the talk.
“Dad? It’s me.”

“No, I’m fine. And so are Harry and Hermione.”

“You saw her this morning? Good.”

“Listen, we’ve found something the muggle minister needs to know.”

“Yes, it’s urgent.”

“Yes.”

“No, the Ministry can’t know.”

“Really not, Dad. Trust me.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you Dad.”

“I’ll tell them, but with this crisis going on…”

“I’ll tell them.”

“Thanks. See you soon.”

He flicked the thing off and sighed. “He will send a message once we can go in. And we’re invited to dinner at the Burrow. All of us.”

Harry winced. “OK. But you’re the one to tell Hermione.”

“Alright. And you tell her about Hood,” Ron responded.

Hood saw Harry wince even more after that.

*****

At least Downing Street looked like it did in the pictures she had seen. Not everything should change, Hood thought, as they approached the building. She also approved of the reinforced and armed guards there. The country was at war, after all. But why they were not sending the reporters laying siege to the building away, she couldn’t tell.

Hood couldn’t dwell much on that though. She had to take care not to fall out of formation again - since she was currently wearing an invisibility cloak, Harry and Ron wouldn’t notice her absence, and she might get lost or cut off. It was a marvelous thing, this cloak. With one of these, she would be able to sneak up on any other ship! Provided it also worked against radar, of course.

A red-haired older man stepped out of the building to meet them. “Ron, Harry,” the man said, smiling.

“Dad,” Ron said.

“Arthur.” Harry nodded at him.

So, that was Ron’s father, Hood thought. He looked tired, but friendly. “Follow me.”
Mister Weasley led them inside the Prime Minister’s residence, and if not for her compass, Hood would have been lost quickly. A ship wasn’t made for navigating the insides of buildings. Some harbours were complicated enough!

Sooner than she had expected they were meeting the Prime Minister. Who also looked tired. And angry.

“So… what’s this important magical affair I need to be informed of right now? And away from that magical portrait spying on me? In the middle of the biggest crisis in my term?” He sounded angry. And suspicious. Leaning forward, he snarled: “Thousands of people died in an attack aimed at your Ministry! An attack by magical planes which do not show up on radar! The Royal Air Force is getting blamed for this, and I can’t tell the public, or even the Air Force, that it wasn’t their fault! You better be here to tell me that you found whatever new ‘Dark Lord’ was behind this! And give me a good excuse so I can stop having around-the-clock combat air patrols and missile batteries in London that will be useless against magic!”

Oh, yes, he was angry. And, as far as Hood could tell, with good reason. This was worse than the Blitz! At least during that war, people had known who had attacked them, and could fight back.

“Sir,” Ron said, “we’ve been investigating the attack on London, and we found someone who needs to meet you.”

Hood pulled the cloak off herself and saluted. “Her Majesty’s Ship Hood, reporting for duty!”

The Prime Minister stared at her, then at the wizards. Mister Weasley was staring at her as well.

“As far as we can tell, she’s the personified spirit of the battlecruiser Hood,” Harry explained. “She says she was called back from wherever she was because the country needs her.”

Hood nodded. “I’m fully operational, sir. Ready to serve.”

The Prime Minister was still staring at her and the others. And Ron’s father was now looking very interested. Fascinated even.

“She demonstrated that, sir,” Harry added. “She has the firepower of a battlecruiser. She can summon those miniature turrets that fire full-sized shells.”

“Like the shells that devastated London yesterday?” the Prime Minister asked with narrowed eyes.

Hood hadn’t been able to check the areas that had been bombarded either. The police had cordoned everything off, she had been told. Maybe the Prime Minister would let her check it out? She was quite familiar with big guns, after all.

“There are some similarities, sir. Auror Weasley and myself fought the attackers yesterday. We brought down three of the seaplanes. And we saw the creature shelling the city. It looked female, but inhuman. Pale white skin and hair, surrounded by floating, warped cannons, blood-red armour…” He shook his head. “We tried to close with her, but she disappeared in that storm.”

Hood fought not to shiver at hearing that description. She didn’t know how she knew, but this creature was unnatural. Corrupted.

The Prime Minister sighed. “Magic.”

“Obviously,” Ron said.
“I would usually question this, but in a weird, ‘magical’ way, it seems to fit.” The man shook his head.

“Sir?” All three wizards looked surprised.

“Our investigators found an unexploded 15 inch shell. Or rather, a 38 cm shell. Of a type not seen in over 50 years.”

Hood blinked. 38 cm… did he mean…?

“To their surprise, they also identified the wrecked seaplane we managed to secure as originally belonging to the Bismarck.”

Hood pressed her lips together so she wouldn’t curse in the presence of the Prime Minister.

The Bismarck. The ship that had sunk her, 60 years ago. The ship that she would have to fight again.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 3rd, 2001

Hood was not quite as confident as she acted, in Ron Weasley’s opinion. She had sounded very determined when she had assured the Prime Minister that she was ready to defend Britain, and that Harry and Ron would be able to deploy her anywhere within seconds. As the man had said, ‘the very picture of the spirit of the Navy’.

But now that they had left No. 10 Downing Street, and she had returned the Cloak of Invisibility to Harry, she was no longer watching the streets with eager curiosity. Instead, her manner was more subdued.

“We should eat something,” Ron said. The whole meeting with the Prime Minister had taken so long, it was already afternoon.

“Oh, yes!” Hood perked up. “I need to replenish my bunkers!”

“I guess that means you’re hungry,” Harry said, with a wry smile. “Fish and Chips OK?”

“I’ve never eaten before, so… I guess?” Hood smiled widely.

“Alright.” It seemed fitting that her first meal would be a classic British meal. Ron ducked into the next side alley, out of sight of the muggles, and apparated to his favourite food stall.

A few minutes later he was handing one meal to Harry and one to Hood. “Bon appetit.”

“That was good! Can I have another?”

Ron looked up from his not yet unwrapped meal to Hood, who was beaming at him. “You already ate?”

She nodded several times. “Yes. Can I have more? I’m a battlecruiser, not a frigate.”

“Merlin’s beard, Ron, she eats faster than you!” Harry said.

Ron shot him a glare. That had been back in first year! He turned to Hood. “Well… I guess I can get another portion.” Her smile seemed to shrink a bit. “More?” he asked.
She nodded again. “I need to fill my tanks so I don’t run out of fuel.”

Ron had a sudden vision of an empty Fish and Chips shop and an empty purse. His empty purse. He looked at his own untouched meal and wrapped it up again. “We need to take her to Grimmauld Place, Harry.”

Harry looked confused for a moment, then his eyes widened. “Oh.”

A minute later they were in No. 12 Grimmauld Place.

Hood was looking around. “That looks a bit fancy for a restaurant that serves food wrapped in newspapers,” she commented.

“It’s not a restaurant. It’s our home,” Harry said. “We needed to get off the street so we can get you more food without making a scene. Let’s go to the kitchen.”

“Well, at least the kitchens haven’t changed in 60 years,” the Battlecruiser said.

Ron chuckled while Harry winced. The kitchen was Harry’s domain, and he would have loved to get more modern appliances, but the house was far too magical for that.

Ron put his meal on the table and drew his wand. A Doubling Charm later, it had multiplied. “Enjoy!” he said to Hood, who was staring at the sight. Then she dug in.

Ron had to recast the charm two times until the girl finally declared that she was full, and that magic was the best thing ever for replenishment.

Harry was still shaking his head in amazement.

“Well,” Ron said, ”it looks like you’ll need bigger portions for dinner than you thought. Remember to cook Hermione’s favourite meal.”

“Again? We had it yesterday.”

“So?” Ron shrugged.

“She’ll know we’re up to something,” Harry said.

“And? She’ll still be in a better mood.” Ron shook his head.

“Alright,” Harry said with a sigh. “I’m going to the Ministry and file a ‘we’re not yet done’ report. I’ll be grumpy, so Dawlish shouldn’t bother us until tomorrow or the day after.”

“I’ll stay here with Hood,” Ron looked at the girl who was studying The Quibbler left on the table. “I guess we’ll put her in one of the guest rooms.” He rubbed his chin. “Do we have a water bed?”

*****

“Hi, Harry, Ron!”

Ron winced, slightly, when he heard Hermione’s voice from the entrance hall. Hood, who had been reading one of the books Hermione had gathered for her research into the seaplane, looked up. Harry was still in the kitchen, working on dinner.

“Hedwig delivered your letter. You’ve found something important?” The witch entered the living room, and stopped when she saw Hood sitting at her place, surrounded by her books.
Ron knew Hermione didn’t take well to anyone intruding in their home. Even less so when they were intruding on her favourite spots, and to see them reading her books… but they had been best friends for ten years, and they had been living together for four years, if you counted the time spent underground, hunted by Death Eaters. He knew how to deflect her temper.

He quickly stood up and gestured at Hood. “Hi, Hermione. This is Her Majesty’s Ship Hood. Admiral-Class Battlecruiser of the Royal Navy. Recently recalled to service as a girl.”

Hermione blinked. “What?”

Ron knew he would pay for it later, but he couldn’t resist. “Hood? This is Hermione Granger. She doesn’t look like it right now, but she’s the brightest witch of our age.”

The battlecruiser smiled widely and offered her hand while Hermione glared at Ron, before her curiosity took over. Just as Ron had known it would.

“You’re a … ship turned girl? Reincarnated?” she asked while shaking hands.

“She can summon 15 inch cannons. We saw a demonstration in Scapa Flow,” Ron cut in.

Hood nodded. “Yes. I was recalled to protect Britain from the Bismarck.”

The witch narrowed her eyes. “You mean… of course! The Arado Ar 196, and the four turrets… it fits.” She turned to Ron. “If we overlook the fact that there was never any record of such a thing happening.”

“I’m not a thing, I’m a warship.”

“Well, there was Dad’s enchanted car,” Ron pointed out. The Anglia had developed sentience. Of sorts.

“That car didn’t turn into a girl,” Hermione retorted. “Although, there’s Pygmalion.”

She turned to Hood. “This requires further research.”

“After dinner,” Harry said. He must have sneaked up on them during the discussion, Ron thought, without getting noticed. Moody would have had him doing night shifts for such a mistake.

“Oh! Food!” Hood perked up.

“She eats like a warship,” Ron explained to Hermione. “I had to cast the Doubling Charm three times until she was full.”

“‘Eats like a warship’?” Hermione shook her head, huffing. “Ron, warships don’t eat!”

Harry, the sneaky traitor, used the distraction. “Oh, Hermione? Arthur’s invited us all to dinner to the Burrow. The day after tomorrow.”

The witch just nodded, her attention obviously focused on Hood.

Ron sighed. They’d have to make her eat, he just knew it.

*****

A few hours later, they were in their room, ready for bed. Hood was already asleep, on her brand new water bed. The girl had been even more impressed by this invention than by magic, or so it had
seemed. He smiled, reclining on their bed already.

“You were both reckless,” Hermione suddenly said while she was stowing her robe in her armoire. She wasn’t looking at him. “To bring an unknown magical creature to London. After you saw that she could fire 15 inch cannons.”

Ron slowly nodded. “Yes. But she was about to head to London on her own. If anyone had mistaken her for the creature who attacked….” It had been a gut call. He knew Hermione hated those.

The witch sighed. “If anything had happened to you two…”

Ron stood up and went to her, wrapping his arms around her from behind. “It didn’t. We’re safe.”

“But if it had…”

He rested his chin on her head. “We can’t worry too much over what could have been.” He understood how she felt. He had felt the same when he had seen the ruins of the Ministry. If Hermione had been in a meeting with Kingsley...

He heard Harry leave the bathroom, and stop. A moment later his friend had joined them, hugging both of them. Ron felt Hermione shiver, then slowly relax.

“We’re fine,” he whispered.

“We’re together,” Harry added.

She snorted, and turned around in their arms, embracing both of them.

“Let’s go to bed.”

*****

North Sea, Azkaban, May 4th, 2001

There was the island. Azkaban. The cursed prison. She remembered attacking it once, conquering it. She had flown, back then, through the dark sky. Taken the island through treachery, turning the fiends guarding the place against those who deluded themselves into thinking the island was theirs.

She had no need for such subterfuge anymore. No need to bargain with fiends. No need to sneak around in the dark of the night, like a thief. She sailed out of the storm that had carried her there while the sun was already rising, and her cannons turned on the island.

Her guns moved quickly, not slowly, now. She knew her body, her power. She wouldn’t miss as often as she had when she had shelled the Ministry either. She had practiced. Planned. She knew the island, knew the prison. The temptation was there to fire broadside after broadside. To flatten the entire building. Kill everyone inside. Show her power! She could use the dead as well as the living.

But she wouldn’t do that. She was smart as well as powerful.

Her turrets turned a bit, adjusted their aim. And then she fired. Eight 38 cm SK C/34 thundered as one. She eagerly leaned forward, impatient to see the shells hit. There! She could see the wards protecting the prison’s walls flare up as they were destroyed, together with the outer walls themselves. The seaplanes circling overhead let her correct her aim while her guns were reloaded. Less than half a minute later, they fired again. More shells hit the prison, pulverising the remains of the walls.
Her planes spotted broom riders trying to flee. With a savage grin, she ordered the planes to disengage and cover the island’s opposite side. She would deal with the cowards in range of her anti-aircraft guns personally. Her guns could use the exercise. Her SK C/33 guns started firing, filling the air above the prison with deadly shrapnel. One of the wizards was blasted off his broom. Another simply exploded into a red mist. The rest split up. Some dove down to the sea, others rose as fast as they could. None escaped. The fools who thought they could outclimb her flak were shot down. Her seaplanes chased down those using the island as cover, machine guns shredding them from above. And the few idiots who dove into the water were killed with bombs. She reveled in their deaths!

She sailed closer, her smaller guns covering the prison now. Her planes returned, spotting for her. Two guards, hiding in the rubble of a fallen wall, discovered that rubble didn’t stop her secondaries. Two more times guards were spotted, before she reached the pier. She laughed - the same wards that covered the entire island and kept the prisoners from using any form of magical travel now kept the guards from escaping!

Her guns vanished as she stepped on land, but they were still with her, just a command away. They were part of her. And her planes were still circling above as she strode towards the prison, ready to deal with any remaining resistance.

There was none. She entered the remains of the prison’s courtyard, stepping over rubble and bodies, towards the guardroom. The door had survived the shelling, but she drove her gauntlet into it and ripped it off its hinges.

Inside, a guard was cowering, and spells flew at her. She scoffed as they hit. As if such weak attacks could hurt her! The man kept casting and crying while she walked towards him, taking her time. He was whimpering when she reached him and screamed when she crushed his wand and hand.

“Please… please… I surrender…”

She ignored his begging, cocking her head as she thought how he would serve her best. An escort, maybe? Even someone as powerful as she needed escorts. She shook her head. He was too weak for that. He would be fuel. Like his comrades. Smiling, she crushed his throat and let him choke to death.

Then she took his keys from him, and entered the cell tract. Many of the prisoners on the first floor were screaming, driven to madness by the shelling no doubt. Those were the petty criminals, she remembered. The weak ones. Fuel. She opened cell after cell, and silenced them. Before she headed down to the dungeons. Where the dangerous prisoners were housed. The murderers. The rapists. The Death Eaters.

She stopped. Death Eaters. She remembered them. They were her followers. Those who had fought for her. Before she had been defeated. Those who had failed her. Caught in the memories, she passed the cells, searching for someone she remembered. In the fifth cell she found a witch who looked familiar. The woman was not cowering in a corner, like the others, the common criminals, but facing her.


The witch, Malfoy, gasped. “Milord? Is that you? Have you returned?”

She nodded. “I have returned. As you knew I would.” She opened the cell, and the witch fell to her knees.

“Thank you, milord! Thank you! My husband, my son, they fell in battle. I was captured,
imprisoned, hoping… you came!” The witch smiled at her, grasping at her armoured boots. “You came!”

“Rise, Malfoy,” she commanded, and the prisoner stood up. The woman was strong. Not as strong as others she remembered, but strong enough. She reached out and gripped the witch’s throat, cutting off the babbling words.

While Malfoy fought to breathe, feet dangling in the air, she reached for her power, her new power. It flowed into her hand, and then into the witch. The prisoner started to scream while her body changed, twisted, weak flesh being replaced. Improved.

Malfoy would make a good escort.

*****
Auror Alfons Runcorn was fighting to stay awake. As a rookie Auror, he was stuck on the night shift more often than not, and the last hours were always the worst. Even with sun rising, he felt as if he could fall asleep at any moment. It wasn’t fair. While he was one of the youngest - newest - Aurors, most of the Corps wasn’t that much older than him, or hadn’t served that much longer. If he had been just two years older, he’d have been part of that large wave of wizards recruited to replace those lost in the war. And he’d only have had to spend at most one night out of seven on this shift. Not three out of seven.

He snorted. Of course, time in the Corps wasn’t the only thing that made a difference. Potter and Weasley were the best example. Shacklebolt’s ‘golden boys’ had been fast-tracked into the Aurors. Their training at the Academy, minimal as it had been, had happened after they had been recruited! Those two had never served on the graveyard shift! And their arrogance! They may have defeated Voldemort, but they flouted every rule and regulation, and looked down on all their supposed colleagues, even veteran Aurors! They kept to themselves, only socialising with their lover, the Minister and Weasley’s family. But that would change with Shacklebolt dead! No more nepotism! Dawlish had given them a taste already. Everyone in the Corps knew they were on some muggle-baiting case, in the middle of nowhere.

He was so focused on imagining Potter and Weasley having to do actual work, instead of coasting on their reputation, he almost missed the alert from one of the mirrors he was watching. Then he reacted with such haste, he kicked his chair over when he jumped up, and hit his hip against his desk when he ran towards the wall.

He activated the mirror. “Ministry of Magic!”

“Azkaban is under attack! The wards have fallen!”

He recognised the voice - Timothy Brown, he had been in Alfons’s year. “Tim? Who is attacking you?”

“I don’t know! They blasted the wards, and toppled the walls! Merlin’s balls! I have to get out of here! Send help!”

“Tim? Tim? TIM!”

Alfons yelled, but no one answered, and the mirror soon went dark. He took a deep breath and noticed he was trembling.

Then he remembered - he had to alert the Auror in charge!

He hit his hip again in his haste to reach the door.

*****

Fifteen minutes later, Alfons and all the Aurors on his shift as well as the Hit-Wizards’ ready force - all of them young as well - were on brooms at the coast, facing the North Sea. Brannigan, the veteran Auror in charge, was addressing them.
“Alright! Someone’s been attacking Azkaban. We’ve received one alert, then nothing. Apparition is still blocked, so we assume that the wards that were taken down were just those protecting the building itself, not the ones affecting the island. Which means we’ll have to fly there. Keep your eyes open, and your Human-presence-revealing Spells and your Shield Charms going - we don’t know what awaits us.”

Brannigan nodded to the wizards and witches assembled, and mounted his broom. The older wizard truly led from the front, as Alfons had heard others say, taking point. Or so the Hit-Wizards would call it.

Alfons soon was struggling to keep his broom flying straight while maintaining his Shield Charm and paying attention to all the markers his detection spell had created. He hadn’t been the best flyer at Hogwarts, he hadn’t even made reserve on the Ravenclaw house team. But he’d make do. He was an Auror!

It took what felt like hours to Alfons to reach the prison island in the North Sea. The smoke was the first thing they saw, rising above the island. Alfons heard the broom riders next to him mutter curses. There had been an attack then - he had hoped it was a misunderstanding. Or some prank. Licking his suddenly dry lips, he slowed down a bit, letting others pass him. This was what Hit-Wizards were for, after all.

“Alright!” Brannigan’s amplified voice reached the entire group. “We’re landing on the eastern shore, then we’ll check the situation at the prison proper. Prisoners may have escaped and might still be on the island, so stay sharp now!”

Alfons bent over his broom and recast his Shield Charm and Human-presence-revealing Spell. This was it. His first real combat. Whoever had attacked the island would be more dangerous than the pickpockets he had arrested so far.

The grey-robed Hit-Wizards shot ahead, fanning out in pairs. Show-offs, Alfons thought. As if they had more experience than himself - almost all of them were rookies too. Still, they looked dashing. They were close to the island now. Already inside its wards, he realised with no little trepidation. Soon...

A series of explosions almost threw him off his broom. He managed to stay on it, jerking on the handle. Others hadn’t been so lucky. He saw one Hit-Wizard tumble from his broom, waving his arms around as he fell into the sea. Two others vanished in an explosion.

“Scatter! Scatter!” Brannigan yelled.

Alfons hurried to follow the order, diving towards the sea as more explosions sounded above him. He heard screams, and more explosions, and sounds he didn't recognise. His shield suddenly vanished, and what looked like metal or rock fragments flew past him. What was happening?

He flew towards a bank of fog. He could hide there. Before he reached it though, something emerged from it. Something inhuman. It was walking on water, no, gliding. White skin, red eyes, deformed limbs waving… muggle guns?

He tried to jerk away and shield himself at the same time.

He managed neither.

*****

Hermione Granger wasn’t in the best of moods when she arrived at the Ministry of Magic. Not really because Harry and Ron had brought home, as if it were a lost puppy, an unknown magical creature with the power of a battlecruiser. That she could handle with a lecture or two. No, she was annoyed because she wanted to examine the ‘shipgirl’ at length, but had to check and, if needed, repair the Ministry’s wards instead. At least according to Selwyn. Though if the mysterious attacker - she wasn’t calling her the ‘Bismarck’ without more proof than some conjured plane and a dud shell - returned, she’d rather be certain those wards were still in place as well. The enemy might use more exotic attacks. It just took so much time to ensure the work of the Ministry’s Curse-Breakers was correct. Yesterday had been an exercise in frustration just explaining a better ward scheme to those fools, after taking stock of the existing standard wards!

“Good morning, Ma’am. You’re early.” Jonathan nodded at her from his usual place at the entrance.

“Good Morning. I came early because I may have to leave early,” she answered. “Chasing down some research material.” Which, technically, was true. Hood would be with the boys, ready to be ‘deployed’ at once.

“About ghosts?”

“Ghosts?”

“There’s a rumour that the Ministry was attacked by German ghosts. Grindelwald’s legacy,” Jonathan said.

She sniffed. “Ghosts wouldn’t be able to cause this. They cannot affect physical matter.” Really, how gullible were people?

“Poltergeists can,” Jonathan retorted.

“Those are not real ghosts.” She shook her head. “No, I do not think this is the work of ghosts. And Grindelwald wasn’t involved with the Nazis, so I doubt he’d use their planes.” If they still had the Resurrection Stone, she would be able to summon Grindelwald’s ghost, to check… She shook her head. There was a reason they had thrown the stone away, and it wasn’t just the curse on it. The temptation to drag souls from the afterlife to interrogate was too great.

“Ma’am?”

She forced herself to smile. “Just a thought I had, and dismissed.”

She dropped by her office, quickly went through her mail and memos, then proceeded to the sealed room where the anchors of the core wards of the building were located - conveniently in her own department. Others would be replacing the basic wards on the upper floors, those which had been destroyed along with the floors they had been covering. Those were basic wards. Easy to cast and maintain. But the old wards, those laid down when the building was built, centuries ago, and to which layers after layers had been added, usually by her predecessors? Those required experts.

Fortunately, Hermione had become quite the expert on wards, during the war. Having to break through some of the oldest wards in Britain to reach the Dark Lord’s Horcruxes had made that necessary. She still remembered the surprise on Lucius Malfoy’s face when they had entered his office. And when they had forced Veritaserum down his throat. Not waiting until the effects had ended before killing him had been one of the hardest decisions of her life, after what he had spilled.

She shook her head. She didn’t have time to relive the war. She touched the seal on the entrance with her wand, concentrating on the passcode. The seal slowly faded into the mahogany wood, then the
door started to open. She stepped through, and watched as it closed behind her, ensuring no one else could enter after her. Then she turned around. The floor of the chamber was covered with dust and slabs of stone. Marble, mostly, but she saw some obsidian as well, and even some sandstone - a very odd choice as material to carve runes into, given how soft it was. For stone.

She sniffed. The air was cold and smelled dusty. And faint traces of smoke. Some runes had burned out. Which means at least one ward had been attacked. Which was quite curious, seeing as the basic wards should have stopped all physical attacks, such as bombardment by naval artillery.

She narrowed her eyes and flicked her wand, adding more light to the room as she started to search the stones and plaques. Most were old and exotic, and usually quite specific. No goblin could enter the Ministry as long as a particular ward was still active. No ghost could haunt it either. Nor could undead enter… the lowest five levels. No wonder the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures was located on the third floor. Or had been - most of it had been destroyed in the attack.

And then, at the very back of the room, she found a marble plaque without visible runes. Closer examination showed the remains of runes. They didn’t look like they had burned out though… it looked more like they had been discharged. And quite recently. Which made no sense - this was the room for wards. Permanent protection spells. Not… whatever spell had been cast here.

Hermione frowned. While she wouldn’t put it past some of her predecessors to make mistakes, she doubted they would have made mistakes in such a crucial area. No one would risk the building’s wards to unknown spells, after all. And it had been triggered during, or at least in close proximity to the attack.

She would have to further research this.

Hermione picked the plaque up after another careful examination. At least she could tell Selwyn that all the wards were fine without lying.

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The Ministry was in an uproar when Harry Potter arrived in the morning. Late morning. Azkaban had been attacked, the guards presumed dead or captured. Two dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards from the relief force dead or missing. Harry winced when he heard rumours that the two survivors had been babbling about pale creatures walking on water before being dosed with Calming Draughts. If the rumours were true then there was not just one creature attacking Britain, but several.

He needed the memories of the survivors. But that would be tricky. Not even Dawlish, who generally arrived late himself, would miss how those ‘creatures walking on water’ fit the case he had dumped on Harry and Ron yesterday.

“Potter! My office! Now!” Dawlish’s voice sounded through the Auror offices.

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. He didn’t need this. He didn’t want this. But it was inevitable. Shaking his head, he made his way towards the Head Auror’s office.

“Yes?” Harry entered and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. When he saw Dawlish hiss through his teeth, he snorted. He knew he shouldn’t act like this. Hermione had told him many times not to provoke the Head Auror, but the man was an idiot, and Harry couldn’t stomach being deferential to the likes of him. Or even polite. Not after the way he and his friends had been treated
by the Ministry in their fifth year. Both men knew what they thought of each other anyway.

“Where is Weasley?”

“He’s already working on our case. I’ve just come in to check the mail,” Harry said.

“I see.” Dawlish took a deep breath. “Have you heard about the attack on Azkaban?”

Harry nodded. “Azkaban was attacked at dawn. The guards are missing, presumed dead or captured, the Aurors and Hit-Wizards who responded to their calls for help were massacred over the North Sea.”

“Ten Aurors and eleven Hit-Wizards are dead, Potter! And do you know what the two survivors saw?” Dawlish glared at him.

“Creatures walking on the water according to the grapevine.” Harry met the man’s eyes without flinching. He had stared down Snape, once. In their last disagreement, before Voldemort had killed the potioneer.

“Yes. Does that sound familiar?” Dawlish cocked his head to the side. “Hm? ‘A girl who walks on water’? Does it?” His voice was slowly rising.

“Yes.” Harry was trying to keep a lid on his temper himself. If he and Ron had reported what they had seen, two days ago, this might not have happened. He snorted. As if. Dawlish would have sent some idiots to Scapa Flow, and they would have attacked Hood. Or antagonised her until she attacked them. Maybe he should have pushed to become Head Auror, after Voldemort’s defeat. Or pushed Ron into taking the post. But even if he had managed that, Harry knew that he wouldn’t have lasted long dealing with the kind of people left in the Auror Corps.

“You were sent up there a day ago. Yesterday’s report claims that you are still investigating this.” Dawlish’s left eyelid was twitching. A nervous tic, according to Hermione.

“Yes.” Harry nodded. It was even true.

Dawlish placed his hands on his desk and stood up, leaning forward. “I want a full report of what you and your partner did yesterday. And what you didn’t. If twenty good wizards and witches died because you skived off work…” He snarled.

“We went up to Scapa Flow, ensured that there was no threat to the Statute of Secrecy, and we’re still investigating the matter. We don’t know enough to report yet,” Harry said, trying to be reasonable. At least as he saw it. “I need to know what the survivors saw to see if it has a connection to our case.”

Dawlish exploded. “Bloody hell! Who do you think you are, talking to me like that? I’m the Head Auror! I’m your superior! If I say I want a report I get a damn report! You don’t demand anything! You wouldn’t even be an Auror if it wasn’t for Shacklebolt!”

So much for his attempt at being diplomatic, Harry thought. He had to suppress the urge to curse the idiot - Dawlish almost sounded as though he was glad Kingsley had been killed. He couldn’t understand how Hermione managed to deal with the Ministry brass without cursing them. Maybe she was cursing them on the sly? He ground his teeth. “Dawlish, do you know why Kingsley made Ron and me Aurors as soon as he was Minister, skipping all the training? It wasn’t because we asked him to.” They hadn’t wanted to. All they had wanted was to finish off the last Death Eaters and their helpers, and be done with the whole war. It hadn’t worked out like that.
The Head Auror leaned forward. “Why did you join the Corps then?”

“Because he wanted us to be Aurors, so us hunting down the remaining Death Eaters would be seen as the Ministry’s action.” It had taken some convincing too. Hermione’s takeover of the Department of Mysteries had been the main concession, but Harry and Ron had insisted on skipping all but the essential training. And the usual rookie assignments.

Dawlish hissed again. The man understood politics, Harry knew that, or he’d have never become Head Auror. “I see.”

“This attack is as bad as what Voldemort did,” Harry continued. Worse actually, seeing as far more muggles had died here than in the entire war. Not that Dawlish would care about them. “We’re working on it. With, or without these.” He patted his Auror robe with his left hand. “We don’t care about Ministry politics, or power plays, or pureblood pride. We’re going to stop whatever monster did this. But we’re not going to risk anyone betraying us to the enemy.” Not again. It went without saying that they wouldn’t let the Ministry stop them either.

Dawlish stared at him without saying a word, then he slowly nodded. “Alright.” The man sounded as if he was pushing each word out through his teeth. “You and Weasley continue your case. But if you find out about any danger to the Aurors, I want to know. Before something like this happens again.”

Harry nodded. Dawlish was probably hoping to claim at least some of the success for himself. They’d deal with that once they had dealt with the threat from the sea.

*****

London, Tower Hill, May 4th, 2001

HMS Belfast. Hood knew this ship. They had sailed together, in the war, on a patrol. Soon afterwards the light cruiser had struck a German mine, and had been taken to the dock for repairs. Hood had been sunk before Belfast had returned to service.

And now she was walking on her decks. The last ship left of her time. All the others had been sunk, or scrapped. Hood ran her hand over the railing and wondered if Belfast’s spirit was waiting to return as well. Wishing to serve once more. Or had her transformation into a museum ship changed her spirit as well? Unlike HMS Victory, Belfast had been decommissioned. Did such an event change a ship?

“Excuse me!” she spoke up. Ron, who had been watching the river and the sky, jerked, his hand going into his jacket, before he realised she had addressed the guide.

“Yes, Miss?”

“I was wondering... “ She pointed at the A-Turret. “Could Belfast be restored to war service?”

The young man smiled. “You’re not the first one to ask that. With the rumours of Nazi planes being behind the... attack, a lot of visitors have asked if we could ‘fill ’er up and sail on’.” He shook his head. “It’s not possible. Well, theoretically, we could, but it would be more difficult and complicated than building a new ship. And, well... she’s an old girl. Outdated. She’d be of as much use as the Victory in a war.”

Hood frowned. “Her 4-inch dual-purpose guns and her Bofors would shoot any Arados out of the sky. And while her 6-inchers wouldn’t get past the armour belt, her torpedoes would give Bismarck pause.” She’d feel a lot better if she had an escort like this.
The guide’s smile didn’t change, but she felt his tone was a bit patronising. “Miss, there’s a reason we decommissioned this ship. Modern ships can strike planes and other ships at ranges this ship could only dream of.” He patted the railing. “She’s done her duty.”

The battlecruiser scowled and gathered steam to tell the young man just where he could put his opinion, but Ron put his hand on her arm.

“Thank you, sir.” The wizard smiled at the man. “A friend of ours was killed in the attack.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

Once the guide had left, Ron turned to her.

She scoffed. “All those fancy rockets wouldn’t get through my own armour belt. If they even hit!”

Ron didn’t say anything, just stared out at the river and the sky again.

“You know, I’m keeping an eye on the sky and the water.” She tapped her temple. “My radar’s working fine. No one is sneaking up on us.”

“We don’t know if your radar works on the enemy. Or theirs on you,” he said. He looked at her though. “So… did you feel anything?”

She shook her head. “No. Nothing.” She couldn’t sense anything from the cruiser. Belfast was just a ship. A museum ship. She sighed. “I wonder why I was called back, and no one else.” If she had to face the Bismarck alone… she would do her duty, but she feared she wouldn’t be able to win that battle.

“And who called you back,” Ron added. “Or what.”

She nodded. “Your friend, Hermione, has some ideas she wanted to test.”

He smiled, and she could see how for a moment his body lost its tension. “Yes. That’s what she does. She finds out things. Researches. Plans. Without her, Harry and I would have been lost in the war.”

“Which war?” Hood was curious. The three people whose home she was staying in - and wasn’t that weird, sleeping on a bed, instead of in drydock - had mentioned a war, but hadn’t gone into detail. And she hadn’t asked.

“They call it ‘the Second Blood War’. It was a wizard war, though it spilled into muggle Britain as well, on a few occasions.”

“A wizard war?” She imagined people casting spells at each other on brooms, and in the air.

“Yes. There was a Dark Lord, trying to take over Britain. He had tried it twice before, and had been defeated each time. Once by Harry, once by Dumbledore. When he came back a third time, he had learned from his mistakes. He had spies everywhere…” Ron pressed his lips together. “His followers struck, usually at night. And when people made a stand, he arrived in person, crushing them. So many brave people died, until we finally managed to find his weakness, and lure him into a trap. And more people died, taking him down.”

“I see.” She didn’t, not really. She had no clue how wizards fought. But she recognised pain and loss.
Ron was about to say something else when he suddenly stiffened and stuck his hand inside his jacket, pulling out a mirror. “It’s Harry.” He cast another spell - Hood was getting good at spotting them - and tapped the mirror. “Yes?”

“Ron? Are you with Hood?”

“Yes.”

“I’m here,” Hood added.

“Good. I have bad news. Our enemy attacked Azkaban in the early morning. The island has fallen, and the responding force was massacred.” Harry sounded grim. “The two survivors were in a bad state of shock, but they all agree on one thing: There wasn’t just one creature shooting at them, but several.”

Ron muttered a curse while Hood froze for an instant. She wasn’t just facing the battleship who had sunk her before. She was facing an entire fleet! She fought her fear down. She was a battlecruiser of the Royal Navy! She knew what she had to do.

“Ron, Harry… we need to talk to the Admiralty.”

*****

London, Tower Hill, May 4th, 2001

For the second time in two days, Ron Weasley found himself visiting No. 10 Downing Street. Fortunately, his dad had managed to get him, Harry and Hood another appointment. Unfortunately, Harry’s news had left the Prime Minister in a bit of a state.

“This Nazi shipgirl has taken over your magical prison island and is now gathering a fleet? And it has massacred the force you sent to retake the island?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry nodded.

“Dear Lord! They’ll attack London again, won’t they?” The man sat down behind his desk, sighing.

Ron saw that his dad was slightly pale as well, but otherwise holding up. He had been the one who found Percy’s body when they had stormed the Ministry. Ron had never asked if Umbridge had really fought to the death.

“I think that’s a reasonable assumption, sir,” Harry said with a grim expression.

“That’s why we need to inform the Navy, sir!” Hood cut in. “Even the few submarines, frigates and destroyers that are left can help against the Bismarck.”

“Are you certain?” the Prime Minister asked.

Hood blinked. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“They are facing a man-sized enemy. Their weapons are not made for such targets.” The man pointed at a report on his desk. “I also checked the reports: Neither sea- nor air-based radar noticed the enemy on the Thames as it retreated. Nor did sonar pick it up.”

“But…” Hood trailed off. “They can still see her, and if they can see her, they can shoot her! Even near-misses will do damage!”
The Prime Minister smiled thinly. “We ‘muggles’ can’t even see magical houses. We cannot count on being able to see the enemy. And even if we can see them, there remains the fact that none of our ships are made for artillery duels anymore.”

“We can test that,” Ron said, “with you.”

“I’m not like her!” Hood quickly spat.

“But you’re a magical shipgirl,” Ron countered. “That’s hopefully close enough to see what works and won’t work with muggle weapons.” Hermione had given him a crash course in muggle weapons during the war, in case they were forced to steal some to use against Voldemort, but that hadn’t included naval weapons. They hadn’t actually used any muggle weapons anyway, though they had patterned some of the traps that had decimated the Death Eaters at Hogwarts after their principles. Draco had been ‘turned to chunky salsa’, according to Hermione.

“Telling the Admiralty will threaten the Statute of Secrecy,” Harry cut in. “The ICW won’t like that.”

Ron’s dad spoke up for the first time: “If that enemy attacks London again, the Statute of Secrecy will be threatened as well. We cannot obliviate the entire city.” His smile looked more than a bit forced. “Under these circumstances, informing key muggles about magic is not only allowed, but mandated.”

“Not that we’d let the Ministry know anyway,” Harry said. “They’d bungle it.”

Ron nodded, ignoring how his dad winced. It was true after all - Ron and his friends knew the Ministry had done nothing against Voldemort in their 5th year, and it had fallen quickly when the Dark Lord had returned again in their 7th year. It had been them and the Order who had fought, and finally defeated, the Death Eaters and their leader. And they had paid a heavy price.

The Prime Minister nodded. “Alright. I’ll make the calls. Let’s hope this will not do more harm than good.”

*****

Off Portsmouth, Atlantic, May 4th, 2001

Despite the grave danger they were facing, Hood looked happy, Ron thought. The girl was sailing circles around the patrol boat Harry and he were on. The muggle sailors were taking this better than Ron had expected - they seemed to be living up to their name; apparently they were called the ‘Special Boat Service’, and it probably didn’t get any more special than this. They hadn’t asked any questions either, though their muttering when Hood had jumped overboard and stood on the water had been quite loud.

“Alright,” their leader, Lieutenant Smith, called from the back. “We’ve reached the target area. Airborne and naval radar is deployed. Sonar as well.”

“I’ve picked up a plane and a cruiser on radar,” Hood’s voice rang from the muggle wireless in the back of the boat. “Commencing operation now!”

“Plane’s picking her up,” the muggle sailor at the radio reported. “So does the frigate.”

Ron smiled. If the muggles could see Hood, they should be able to see the Bismarck too. And shoot her.
“I can paint her too,” one muggle soldier said, holding up a muggle device. “Damn weird though… hey! It just stopped working!”

“Radar lost her. Both of them.”

“Where did that stuff around her come from?”

“Looks like some drones?”

“Robots?”

Ron raised his omnioculars. Hood had summoned her rigging. “Damn,” he muttered.

Harry, at his side, agreed. “It looks like summoning her rigging is too much for muggle technology.”

“I’m test firing my guns!” Hood announced through the radio. That at least was still working.

This time, Ron was prepared and cast a charm to block the sound in time. So did Harry. The muggles though were surprised when the 15-inchers fired.

“Dear Lord!”

“What the hell was that?”

“Radar’s picking up artillery shells!”

“What the hell is going on?”

“It’s classified,” Harry said, without lowering his omnioculars. In a quieter voice, he added: “Always wanted to say that.”

Ron chuckled.

“Test firing finished. Hood standing by for further instructions.”

Another voice was heard on the radio. “Hood, this is HMS Kent. Are you ready for the missile test?”

“Affirmative, Kent,” Hood said.

“Firing.”

Ron searched the horizon. There! A streak was coming towards Hood… and passing her.

“Missiles don’t work on her either,” Harry said in a flat voice.

“Kent, this was a clear miss. Without evasive action.” Hood sounded a tad happier than appropriate for the occasion, Ron thought. But then, she had been making comments about modern naval weapons for a while. “Try your guns!”

“Negative, Hood. We do not have dummy rounds for them.”

“It’s a 4,5 inch gun, Kent. I’m a battlecruiser, not a tin can. It won’t even scratch my armour belt. Fire it!”

Ron glanced at Harry while the two ships argued back and forth. “Chip on her shoulder?”

His friend nodded. “So much for secrecy.”
Behind them, the muggle sailors were muttering again. Ron heard ‘battlecruiser’ and ‘Hood’ several times.

In the end, it took the admiral commanding the ‘exercise’ to order the frigate to fire on Hood. The result was not promising either - Hood was able to dodge the shots until the frigate closed in, and even then their accuracy was not that great. If the frigate had been a Chaser, she wouldn't even have made the reserve team of the ‘claws. And when Hood was finally hit, it didn’t do anything that Ron could see. It was better than the torpedo test though - those didn’t even notice Hood.

“Did you see that? I told them, the shells would bounce off my armour belt! So much for outdated, hm?” Hood was beaming when she came alongside the patrol boat. She must have seen their reaction, since she frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Ron winced. He hated to ruin her good mood. “You know, the goal of this test was to find out what the Navy could do to help fight Bismarck and her fleet.” He grimaced when her face fell.

“And the answer is: Not much?” Hood looked crestfallen. “Bismarck has much better armour than I have.”

“We’ll come up with something,” Ron said. “We always do.”

“We’re at our best when under pressure,” Harry added.

Ron forced himself to smile confidently. Even if he wasn’t feeling quite that confident.

But all of them would do their best. They had no other choice.

*****


Hermione Granger was frustrated. She still hadn’t found out what kind of spell had been triggered by the attack on the Ministry. If her predecessors had been documenting their actions and especially their additions to the wards properly, she would have been able to simply consult their notes. But that wasn’t the case. At least she knew who had cast the spell: Alois Fickleton, Head Unspeakable from 1841 to 1862. And, though she hadn’t found any outside source to confirm this, the last Seer to hold that post.

But even with that knowledge, she had not yet deciphered the runes on the plaques, or rather, their remains. And with Azkaban having been taken over by more of those creatures, the need to find out what exactly had happened was even more urgent. The Ministry certainly would not be able to stop them. Not when they hadn’t been able to stop even a single one before.

A knock at her office’s door interrupted her examination. “Yes?” she called out, her wand in hand. Some habits died hard.

Katherine entered. “Hermione? I have the notes from our archive you wanted. And the records you wanted from the Ministry’s archives.”

Hermione smiled. “Thank you, Katherine.” Fickleton’s notes, finally! With luck, she’d find out more thanks to them. And the reports would hopefully shed some light on the question of why a German battleship wanted to destroy the British Ministry of Magic.

“I hope you can read them,” the Unspeakable added.
“What?” Hermione took the stash of parchment and checked. Then she hissed. “Code… the bloody lunatic wrote his notes with a cipher…” If she were superstitious, she’d have taken this as a sign that all Seers lived just to ruin her plans. Trelawney certainly had not convinced her otherwise during her time at Hogwarts.

“Hermione? Do you have further need of me?” Katherine asked.

Hermione looked up and shook her head. “No, thank you again. I’ll have to deal with this.”

The other witch left her office, maybe a bit too quickly, Hermione thought. Well, she had to admit that she had been a bit short-tempered these last few days. Some of the clerks in the archives had paled when she had visited, too.

She sighed and stared at the notes again. Fickleton had probably thought he was being clever. She snorted. He certainly hadn’t foreseen modern electronics. Her computer, safe from any magical influence in the house of her late grandparents, would make short work of this.

And, she added, with more than a bit of guilt, if the monster returned to attack the Ministry, she’d not be inside.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 4th, 2001

It had taken her computer far longer than she had expected to crack the cipher. Even using the best programs she could her hands on, it had taken hours. But she had succeeded! So, Hermione Granger was both tired and hungry when she arrived home, but also smiling.

One look at Ron, sprawled on their couch, Harry, brooding in his favourite armchair, and Hood, looking like she had just heard she’d be scrapped, destroyed her good mood.


“Modern weapons do nothing against Hood,” Ron said.

“Ah.” She knew what that meant.

“And Bismarck now has escorts, at least!” Hood said. “I’m up against a fleet!”

“We’ve checked the memories of the surviving Aurors in the pensieve,” Harry explained. “Hood identified two of the additional creatures as light cruisers.”

The battlecruiser - and Hermione still had to wrap her mind around that thought - nodded. “Yes. Definitely light cruisers. Or, as today’s Navy would call them, ‘destroyers’,” the girl added with a huff. “I can’t fathom why they do that.”

“How did you identify them?” Hermione asked.

Hood shrugged. “I just knew. Their weapons, their displacement, everything fit.”

“I see.” Probably a combination of experience, perception, and some inherent magical ability then, Hermione deduced. She sat down on the couch and leaned against Ron. “I’m not convinced we’re facing the Bismarck, by the way.”

Hood, who had been pacing, turned around. “It has to be her! The weapons fit, the planes fit. Even my presence fits.”
“But why would the Bismarck attack the Ministry of Magic? Or Azkaban?” Hermione shook her head. “I’ve checked the archives: Wizarding Britain wasn’t involved in the Second World War. They were busy preparing for Grindelwald when the Bismarck was sunk. There was no report of magical interference with that battle.” Most of the purebloods probably hadn’t even realised that the muggles were at war, Hermione thought. “So, why would it attack the Ministry, and not the Muggles?”

“You think there’s a wizard involved,” Harry said. “Someone with a grudge against the Ministry.”

Hermione nodded.

Ron wrapped his arm around her. “No shortage of those. Heck, we three could qualify as well, given what the Ministry did in our sixth year.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Did you check…?”

Hermione knew what he meant. Who he meant. “I did. The seal hasn’t been broken.”

Her friend relaxed some, smiling. Then he leaned forward. “But if there is a wizard behind it - someone creating those monsters - then he’s risking a lot. Another such attack could push the ICW into taking action. And why would he attack with one creature, if a few days later he has more?”


Hermione nodded, glancing at the plaque on top of the fireplace that held the broken wand of Bellatrix. The mad witch had underestimated her until the end, cackling and not realising how she was walking into a trap. If only Neville had lived to see… she shook her head.

Harry didn’t look convinced. “Even if that is true, it takes an exceptional wizard to create such a monster, much less several of them. Such a person would not simply appear out of nowhere.”

“There aren’t many around who’d fit that description,” Ron said. “And I think we can discount Hermione. She would have told us if she was behind this. I think.”

She glared at him for that joke and ignored Harry’s chuckling. And Hood’s stare.

“The well-known wizards and witches are all accounted for,” Harry said. Which meant, Hermione knew, that they were dead. “It doesn’t add up.”

“Possession?” Hermione cocked her head sideways. “If the shade of a dead wizard is using the body of an average wizard…”

Harry looked grim. “Like Quirrel? And Nott?”

“Nott was killed before he was possessed by the ring’s fragment. And his skill with magic was greatly diminished.” Otherwise, the three of them wouldn’t have been able to kill it, Hermione knew.

“He was still better than the original Nott,” Ron said.

“We’re still missing one fragment. At least,” Harry said. “How can we check for that, without my scar?” He tipped his index against his forehead.

Hermione bit her lower lip. “There is a way, but I’d have to use the seal for that. I don’t have to break it, but… carrying it around puts it at risk.”

“Can you do it in your department?” Harry asked.
Hermione quickly did some Arithmancy in her head, then nodded. "I can do it, but the range is limited. Wouldn’t cover all of England, much less Scotland or Azkaban."

“And we’re not taking that thing anywhere close to Azkaban,” Ron stated.

Harry and Hermione nodded. Hood looked lost.

“And what plans have been made to deal with another attack on London?” Hermione said.

Harry sighed. “Well… most of the muggle weapons seem useless. But we’ve come up with a few that should work. In the end it hinges on Hood though.”

Hermione glanced over to the girl. Hood straightened and pushed her chin up. “I’ll beat her or I’ll die trying.”

Hermione nodded. She and her friends were very familiar with that sentiment.

*****

North Sea, Azkaban, May 5th, 2001

She surveyed her escort. Her fleet. All were fueled up and ready. Or as ready as they could be. She frowned when she saw Narcissa pass. The light cruiser looked as she should, but she was flawed. Weaker than she should be. Fully dependent on the power she had poured into the witch. She was a light cruiser, but with the soul of a witch, not a ship. Like her sister ship, Alecto, who was passing her now.

Still, they would serve. They had been blooded as well, fighting the Aurors of the Ministry. And she had learned from her mistake. As evidenced by the next ships who sailed past. Leberecht Maas and Max Schultz. Now these were proper ships! They had the experience, the instincts, and the hatred caused by having been sunk! Fueled with the souls of the debris of Azkaban, they had risen anew, ready to serve and fight.

Four ships. And herself. A flotilla, not the fleet she desired. For a moment, she reconsidered attacking. There were other ships out there, waiting to be called to fight again. Narvik was the grave of so many. And Oslo. But that would take time. She scoffed. There was no need to wait. The Ministry couldn’t stop her, and the muggles were worthless.

Besides, there were her ‘experiments’. Creatures, not even ships, much less the boats she wanted. Mishappen. Warped. But still able to fight. Like undead sea lions, they swam past. A fitting association, she thought, given their destination.

She raised her arm. The flotilla rallied around her, forming up. Leberecht Maas and Max Schultz were the first, sailing in front of her. Narcissa and Alecto were slower, securing her flanks. And the creatures gathered behind her.

Smiling, she called up a storm to hide their passage. When she entered it, she was singing.

“Denn wir fahren gegen Engeland, Engeland.”

*****
Harry Potter woke up with hair covering his face and snoring filling his ears. He brushed the hair aside, gently so as not to wake up Hermione, and cast a Silencing Charm on Ron. Then he glanced at the clock on the side table - mechanical, as all the appliances in Grimmauld Place were. 6 am. Almost time to get up. Of course Ron and Hermione were still asleep. They rarely woke up before the alarm clock rang. He propped himself up on his elbow, looked at them both and smiled.

His best friends. His only family. The only ones he felt safe and happy with. The only ones who kept the nightmares at bay. He sighed. Once again, they had to save Britain. All of it this time. And once again, the Ministry was more of a hindrance than a help. At least the muggles were doing what they could.

Which, sadly, wasn’t that much.

Just as he was about to nap a bit longer, he heard the signal from the fireplace. Someone was calling them. He was out of the bed in a second, conjuring a robe before he reached the door.

“Potter!”

He heard Dawlish even before he reached the hall. The Head Auror’s face was sticking out of the fireplace.

“Yeah?” If this was just a call to complain, Harry would...

“The pickets around Azkaban just alerted us: The creatures have left the island in a magical storm. They’re headed towards the Ministry, as far as we can tell.”

Harry hissed. He had hoped they would have had more time to prepare. To improve their defences. To think of a better plan. But it was like at the Battle of Hogwarts. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be that costly. “Alright. Evacuate the Ministry and keep the Hit-Wizards and Aurors in reserve elsewhere until we send you a Patronus.”

“What?” Dawlish’s eyes were wide open. “What are you going to do?”

“Fight them, of course.”

“Are you… Merlin’s arse, you are!” Dawlish shook his head. “Crazy.”

Harry chuckled when the call ended.

“So, they’re attacking again.”

He turned around. Hermione was standing in the door, dressed in a conjured robe herself. He nodded.

“I’ll wake up Ron.” She glared at him, and he grinned back. Ron didn’t mind the Silencing Charm, but Hermione did. She apparently found his snoring comfortable. “You inform Hood.”

“Alright.”
Hood was sleeping in a guest room. The room next to the one Luna used, when she was visiting. The other guest rooms were still as their occupants had left them, before the last battle. He knocked.

“Hood?”

“Yes?”

Harry opened the door. Hood was blinking at him, sprawled out on the water bed, entangled in torn blankets. Apparently, Harry and his friends were not the only with nightmares.

“The Bismarck and her escorts have left the island, sailing in the direction of London.”

Hood nodded. “Understood. I’ll inform the Admiralty. I mean, the Prime Minister.”

Harry didn’t know why the ship’s radio worked inside the house, where every other piece of electronics failed, but he was not questioning their good fortune. Unlike Hermione, who had wanted to run a battery of tests as soon as they had time. “Meet in the hall. We’ll deploy as soon as possible.”

By the time he was back in their room, Ron was up and slipping into his trousers, the charm dispelled. “Morning, Harry. Do we have time to… refuel?” He grinned.

“We'll grab sandwiches on the way,” Harry said. They didn’t know how long the enemy would take to reach London, so they had to link up with the muggle forces as soon as possible.

“Alright.” Ron grabbed his robe.

“I'll get one as well,” Hermione said, leaving the bathroom. “On the way to the Ministry.”

“What?” Ron whipped his head around to stare at their friend.

“I have to check if that theory about the enemy is correct.” Hermione had that tone Harry was familiar with - she wouldn’t budge. “I’ll be in my office. The safest place in the Ministry. Even if you can’t stop them, they’ll have to go through six floors before they can start on my department’s defences. Plenty of time to use the Floo or apparate.”

Harry didn’t think she’d leave before she had finished whatever checks she was doing. He hadn’t forgotten how she had almost died in the Room of Requirement to find that Horcrux. He nodded anyway.

Ron and he would be doing something far more dangerous, after all.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

*****

Courtsend, Britain, May 5th, 2001

HMS Hood stood at the beach, next to Harry, and faced the coming battle with the stoic expression that was expected of a member of the Royal Navy. The odds did not matter, nor did the numbers - England expected that everyone did their duty in such a situation. And she would. The enemy would have to sink her before they could ravage England’s shores again.

Although, truth to be told, she was a bit uncomfortable with the plan for the coming battle. It relied far too much on magic for her taste. On the other hand, she didn’t doubt that without magic, she’d be sunk in this battle. The Bismarck had sunk her in three minutes, after all, and that had been with the Prince of Wales at her side. Even with Prinz Eugen missing, Hood would have to face the Bismarck
and her escorts alone. An open engagement would be foolish. Magic was the order of the day. Magic and the Army.

She looked at the tracked vehicle - a M270, she had been told was its name - nearby. Rocket Artillery. Who’d have thought that would ever amount to something again? It seemed as if the age of big guns had ended everywhere. But as long as those rockets would do what they had to, she’d not complain. And at least the tanks taking up positions near the shore had decent guns.

She stared out at the sea, trying to catch a glimpse of the approaching enemy, even though she knew her radar would spot the enemy before her lookouts would. Old habits died slowly.

She saw Ron walk up to her. “The Ministry’s been evacuated. The muggles are also preparing for the attack.”

She nodded, not too concerned. London’s residents knew how to handle raids. They had shown that during the Blitz.

“The waiting’s the worst,” Ron said. “I always hated it during the war.”

She knew he meant the wizard war, not the war she had been sunk in, but she nodded. Some things were the same in every conflict. And waiting was the worst - even more so on land! She was a battlecruiser! She should be out on the sea, cutting through the waves to meet the enemy head-on! Not lying in wait for them as if she were some sort of u-boat!

“The enemy outnumbers us, is coming to kill us all, and we’re betting everything on a desperate gamble.” Harry snorted. “Just like Hogwarts. There are even real Nazis this time.”

“And Hermione is working on a solution while we fight,” Ron said, “and the Ministry’s busy being useless.”

Hood narrowed her eyes at the two wizards. “If the Ministry’s so useless, why are you trying to save it?”

Harry shrugged. “We don’t want them to die.”

“And Hermione would go mad trying to rebuild it,” Ron added.

Hood was about to say that sounded like a flimsy excuse, but right then her radar picked up new contacts. She cocked her head and tracked them. Through the radio, she checked with the airborne radar. They had no contacts in that area.

“I’ve detected them. Five ships, and… a mass of smaller craft,” she reported. Her fire directors were already calculating their speed and course. “Transmitting course data.” She was tempted to add ‘Fire when ready!’ but that wasn’t her call to make.

A minute later, her radar was almost overwhelmed when the rocket artillery deployed near the shores started firing and dozens of rockets flew towards the enemy. They could reach a target over 40 miles away… It was hard to believe.

She could detect how the enemy ships moved when the rocket strike reached them, at a range they’d consider themselves safe from attacks. They were spreading out some, dispersing. But she could only imagine the barrage’s effect. Hundreds, thousands of small bombs - bomblets - spread over the area. Hitting the superstructures. Wrecking range finders, killing lookouts, starting fires with a bit of luck. Confusing them. Throwing their formation into disarray. But most importantly, destroying the Bismarck’s radar.
That was the whole point of the strike. If the Bismarck’s radar was not taken out, the next step of the plan would be suicide. Unless the records were correct, and the Bismarck’s own guns would damage her radar when firing. But then - she hadn’t needed that many volleys to sink Hood the first time.

“Do you have the coordinates?” Harry asked.

She nodded, pointing at the map they had prepared. He grabbed her arm, and she felt the by now familiar sensation of being squeezed through a tube. Then she hit the water, and felt at home. She summoned her rigging while she easily kept Harry from sinking until he had pulled his broom out.

The wizard sped away as fast as he could while her four turrets turned, lining up. She could easily make out the Bismarck on her radar. And she had ranged her guns just an hour ago. Minimal adjustments.

Then eight guns spoke, and Hood was fighting her nemesis once again.

*****

Thames Estuary, Britain, May 5th 2001

HMS Hood didn’t cheer when she noticed one, maybe two hits on the Bismarck. But she smiled through clenched teeth when the expected return fire didn’t happen. Not even after double the time it would have taken her to turn and engage. It looked like the rocket artillery barrage had damaged the radar. Maybe even the rangefinders, if she was really lucky. But the smoke rounds getting dropped on the area the enemy was in would hinder their optics anyway.

She fired her main guns again, sailing a course parallel to the enemy. As long as she could hit her enemy, and they couldn’t hit her back she was good. One probable hit. If she had an aircraft of her own it would have been able to spot for her... but she didn’t. Not anymore. And Harry and Ron hadn’t the training to serve as observers.

She directed another salvo of the rocket artillery, for good measure. Reloading a launcher took several minutes, but with the numbers of launchers in position, they could keep up an almost constant fire on the enemy. Her radar showed her the smaller boats breaking formation under the barrage. Then her own guns fired again. Third salvo without any return fire. Hood allowed herself to smile when she noticed another likely hit. Not even the monster she was facing could weather that kind of fire for too long without taking critical damage!

Like clockwork, her fourth volley was underway half a minute after the third. Then her radar picked up an aeroplane over the enemy. They had launched a spotter! “Harry, Ron! Seaplane in the air. It’ll direct their fire if not stopped.”

“Alright, we’re on it!” Ron responded, without any military form.

Hood wouldn’t complain though. Not when the two wizards were about to engage a military aeroplane on just two brooms. And in range of the enemy anti-aircraft guns. Besides, they were Air Force. Kind of.

She fired again, and another rocket salvo struck. But then her radar picked up shells flying towards her. The Bismarck had finally detected her! She flinched, then clenched her jaw. She was a warship of the Royal Navy.

The shells hit all around her, not close enough to hurt her, but she was straddled. She changed course, adjusting her own calculations as she veered to starboard, and wished that damn Nazi seaplane was in range of her four-inchers. Her main guns fired again. Her crew kept up two shots per
minute, like clockwork. The Bismarck fired as well, though. Her enemy had faster reload times than her.

This time the shells hit far too close. No direct hit with plunging fire, to her relief, but the explosions shook her and she felt her hull being battered, some gear shaken lose, some leaks sprung. And that cursed seaplane was still up there, directing that terrible fire. Where were those wizards?

*****

**Thames Estuary, Britain, May 5th 2001**

Ron Weasley hissed as he followed Harry towards the enemy seaplane. He was no coward, he knew that. Had known it for a long time. But what he had seen so far… he had thought the Battle of Hogwarts, when the Dark Lord had turned the Quidditch pitch into a crater, had been terrifying, but this… below him, more of those rockets struck. He thought he heard several explosions, and inhuman screams. Then his broom shook as the creature below him fired her guns again. They were directly over the enemy formation, as Hood called it. The seaplane was circling ahead of them. If they used their smaller guns… he had seen what those did to broom riders.

Harry pushed ahead, of course. He was a Seeker. He focused on his target, and damn the bludgers. Ron was a Keeper. He had to keep an eye on the quaffle, and the bludgers at all times. He was almost relieved when they were close enough to the seaplane to engage it, and still disillusioned. Two Reductor Curses hit one wing, and the aeroplane started to spin and drop, the rear gunner blindly firing until it hit the water.

“I’m hit. No critical damage,” Hood said through the radio.

She sounded hurt though, and Ron wondered what non-critical damage meant for a ship. He saw smoke rise from her position. “Hood, are you on fire?”

“I’m dealing with it. I’m in no danger of sinking.” The sound of her next volley drowned out her words, but he thought he heard ‘not yet.’

“Below us!” Harry suddenly shouted in the radio.

Ron looked down. Four creatures, pale and unnatural, were sailing toward Hood’s position. And behind them, a horde of… “Merlin’s arse! What are those?”

*****

**London, Ministry of Magic, May 5th, 2001**

Inside her office, alone in the Department of Mysteries, and likely the whole Ministry, Hermione Granger tried not to think of what was happening at the mouth of the Thames. Of the danger her friends were facing. She had her own mission. They had to know if their suspicion was correct. She snorted while she cast detection and privacy spells. Just like at the battle of Hogwarts - Harry and Ron were out there, fighting, while she was casting spells deep in the basement, to prepare for the defeat of Voldemort.

Her wand moved back and forth as she unsealed the safe and revealed the sealing crystal. Taking a deep breath, she levitated it out, and into the circle she had prepared on the floor. She wouldn’t touch the thing with her hands - she had touched too many Horcruxes; the mere thought of touching another container for Voldemort’s soul made her shudder with revulsion.

Once again she wished she had found a spell to track Horcruxes. If they had found all the Horcruxes,
before Hogwarts, then maybe there wouldn’t have been so many deaths. They could have attacked Voldemort directly, instead of luring him into a trap… She shook her head. She had a mission.

Pointing her wand at the crystal, she started to cast the spell.

*****

Thames Estuary, Britain, May 5th 2001

Harry Potter’s curses were drowned out by the explosions below him. Another rocket strike had just hit the area of their enemy - part of it at least. The four figures sailing towards Hood were untouched, as was the horde behind them.

“Hood! There is a fleet moving towards you!” he yelled into the radio.

“I’ve detected them. The Bismarck is still operational.” Hood sounded composed now. “She has to be sunk.”

“Can you do it before those things reach you?” Harry asked.

“Yes.”

He didn’t believe her. Or rather, he didn’t think she believed that either. “Redirect the rocket artillery on the other enemies!”

“Negative. The Bismarck is the primary target.”

“She’s barmy!” Ron yelled, next to him.

“No more than we are,” Harry yelled back.

Both of them had done the same thing, at Hogwarts, when Voldemort had sent his werewolves at them. Harry slipped his left hand into his pocket, steering the broom with his knees. He pulled out a can. Timing this would be tricky… on the other hand, the things were on a straight course. He grinned and yelled: “Let’s light them up!”

“You’re barmy!” Ron yelled back, but Harry knew his friend would be right behind him.

The two dived down, towards the sea. Towards the enemy. They didn’t seem to have seen them yet. “Now!” Harry yelled, dropping his can, and canceling the Shrinking Charm on it.

The two tanks hit the water right in front of the enemy, then started to multiply as the Gemino Curse started. The pale humanoid monsters quickly scattered, but the horde was too slow to react. They were still in the middle of the bobbing tanks when Harry and Ron hit them with Blasting Curses.

And the sea turned to fire beneath them.

*****

HMS Hood changed course again. She was taking on water now, and leaking some oil. Her uniform was rent and scorched. That last hit had taken out her Y-turret as well, turning it into a mass of twisted metal, together with one of her four-inchers. But she was still in the fight. And her enemy had to be hurting - their fire had slowed down. Hood’s three remaining turrets fired. It didn’t matter how many guns her enemy had left if they couldn’t aim as well as hers. And the escorts would still
take some time until they were in range.

This time the Bismarck’s salvo went wide. It seemed her rangefinders were still damaged. Hood’s had suffered some damage as well, but her radar was still working. And that was what counted. One more probable hit, she noticed, directing another rocket artillery salvo. Her side hurt when she turned again. One more salvo!

Six fifteen-inch guns fired. How much punishment could the Bismarck take? Hood knew it had taken a whole fleet hours to sink the monster, but she didn’t need to do that. If she could cripple her, take out her weapons, the navy could sink her. Eventually. She just had to last that long.

The two destroyers and the two light cruisers were still closing. Not too much longer until she was in range of their guns, and worse, their torpedoes. Hood’s four-inchers wouldn’t be enough to deal with them, but her main guns were needed to deal with the Bismarck. And those things behind them… she couldn’t call them ‘boats’, but she knew they’d swarm her, and overwhelm her. And yet she had her duty.

Sink the Bismarck.

Another salvo went out, right before her enemy’s arrived. Near-misses only this time, but the shockwaves hurt her, and worsened the damage she had suffered. If only… if only… Another hit! She grinned through her own pain.

Then she blinked. The Bismarck was veering off. Changing course. Retiring from the battle!

Hood blinked through the blood and oil running down her face. The beast was running! She wouldn’t let her escape! She started to change course in response, then realised she’d have to pass through the enemy escorts to go after the Bismarck. And she’d not survive that.

Cursing, she sent a last salvo at the battleship, then turned her attention on the still charging escorts. Destroyers were hard to hit at that range, but if Hood charged them head-on, they’d have a harder time torpedoing her. And they were tin cans.

Her main guns fired, no hits. She corrected her aim when she noticed that the two destroyers were taking evasive action, but only one of the cruisers did as well, and redirected her fire. Her next salvo focused on that cruiser, and one of her guns scored a direct hit. The cruiser’s chest exploded and she fell forward, face down into the water with all her forward compartments flooded while she started to sink.

The other cruiser peeled off, fleeing, but the two destroyers still came at her. Hood’s next salvo missed, and so did the one after that. She wasn’t that worried though. Her own four-inchers outranged their five-inchers by almost two thousand five hundred yards.

They were good though, evading her main guns’ fire as they closed with her. But then they were in range of her remaining four-inchers, and their rate of fire was ten times faster. She focused on the leading destroyer, and the tin can was soon listing to the side, slowing down. Unable to evade her main guns any longer.

A fifteen-inch shell tore the destroyer’s leg off, and left her sinking. The other destroyer finally had enough and turned away. Hood kept firing at the fleeing enemy, but even if she hadn’t been damaged, she wouldn’t have been able to catch her.

She slowed down, standing on weary legs. She had won this battle, but the enemy had escaped. And they wouldn’t sail into such an ambush a second time.
HMS Hood had failed in her duty.

*****

**Thames Estuary, Britain, May 5th 2001**

Ron Weasley had fought Inferi in the war. Sometimes he still had nightmares about those monsters advancing towards him while on fire, with the stench of burning flesh filling the air in that sea cave. Even Bubble-Head Charms couldn’t keep it away, though Hermione insisted that it was just psychological. Whatever that meant.

He was smelling the same stench, above the burning, thrashing things in the water. The screams were new though - the Inferi he had fought until then had not made any sound. Nor had they had any guns. These creatures did.

He saw one managing to escape the killing zone and sent a Blasting Curse at it. Harry and he had quickly found out that anything other than that curse didn’t really have any effect on those things. Piercing Curses were ignored, Cutting Curses barely scratched them, and even Reductor Curses just left small craters or holes in their putrid flesh.

The thing blew up, but the parts left continued to burn, even in the water. He had expected that - it wasn’t the first time he had used Greek Fire, just the first time on such a scale. And the first time on the open sea.

One of the things started firing at him, again. But its aim was off - the explosions didn’t even rattle Ron. Harry swooped in and blew it apart, then had to dive even lower to avoid another one shooting at him.

Ron cursed at his friend for taking such risks when all they had to do was to deal with those who managed to get away, and watch the rest burn.

Suddenly, several explosions shook the mass of monsters, drowning out the screams. Ron jerked his broom around and frantically looked for the source of the attack. “Someone’s shooting at the monsters!”

“This is HMS Hood, engaging the remaining enemies.”

Ron relaxed some, and pulled his broom up some more. He’d rather not get too close to that kind of fire. “What about the Bismarck?” he asked.

“The Bismarck retired from the battle. I was too damaged to pursue her and lost radar contact after fighting the escorts. Two of which escaped as well.”

“She fled?” Ron grinned widely, despite the stench in the air. London was safe. Hermione was safe. The Ministry too.

“I failed to sink her.”

Hood sounded rather… like Hermione, after Malfoy Manor, Ron thought. Another girl who saw anything but a complete success as a defeat. Hermione learned better after Gringotts, but hopefully Hood wouldn’t need to break into a bank as well.

With Hood’s guns, the monsters were quickly dealt with, and Ron descended to sea level next to the battlecruiser. She was looking horrible - scorched and ripped clothes, gashes beneath those, bruises, one of her turrets was a mangled wreck, and her ‘rigging’ had holes in it. He wasn’t quite certain
how the girl could stand.

“How can you make it to the coast?” he asked.

Hood nodded. “Yes. I’m not taking on more water than my pumps can handle.” She glanced at her guns. “I will have to spend a long time in the drydocks though, to repair this damage.”

“Let me try!” Ron said, without thinking, and pointed his wand at her rigging. “Reparo!” He frowned when nothing happened. “I guess it didn’t work. Maybe a healing spell…”

“No, no!” Hood shook her head, blinking. “That fixed part of my damage. Do it again!”

“Alright. Reparo. Reparo. Reparo. Reparo. Reparo.” Ron peered at the girl, trying to spot if anything was getting fixed. That many spells had fixed his parents’ flying car after Malfoy Manor, but he still couldn’t see much of a change in Hood.

“Yes… that’s the pipes fixed, and the power lines.” Hood smiled. “Please continue.”

“Err… of course.” Ron aimed his wand again, flying parallel to the battlecruiser. “Reparo. Reparo. Reparo.” He saw Harry nearby and waved at his friend. Two wands were better than one.

By the time they reached the shore, Ron felt exhausted, Harry looked exhausted, but Hood was beaming. “You even fixed my condensers! Better than new!” She kept looking over her shoulder at her rigging, even. Harry had tried healing spells, but they hadn’t done anything for Hood’s wounds. Or bruises.

Hood made her rigging vanish - she didn’t know where it went, or so she had said when Hermione had asked, several times - and stepped on shore. She stumbled at once. “Ow.” She looked confused. “I’m hurting… but I was repaired…”

“But apparently not healed,” Harry said. “Episkey!”

“Thank you.” Hood frowned. “Getting hurt like humans is unnatural! I’m a ship. I shouldn’t be bleeding!”

Ron exchanged a glance with Harry. “You didn’t feel hurt until now?”

Hood shook her head. “No. Not while I had my rigging.”

“Hermione will love analysing that,” Ron muttered.

“No, she won’t. Not in the middle of a crisis,” Harry said.

Hood sighed. “I know. I failed. I should have sunk the Bismarck. But she escaped, and she will return. And she won’t fall for such an ambush again.” The girl shook her head. “Next time she’ll be prepared.” Left unsaid was that Hood didn’t think she’d survive that battle.

“Then we’ll have to think of another plan!” Ron patted Hood on the shoulder. “We’ve been there before. In the last wizard war, we had a plan as well. We did our best, but… we realised we couldn’t win.” He grimaced. “So, we had to come up with an alternative. And we did.” He nodded. “Trust us - we’re good at that. Well, Hermione and Harry are. I mostly keep them from moping.”

“I don’t mope,” Hood said. “But what can we do when the Bismarck returns?”

“Well…” Ron didn’t have an answer ready. “She’s hurt as well. Damaged I mean. She’ll take time to recover. Time we can use.”
“And she’ll have to find a way to counter the rocket launchers. She’ll probably not get close to Britain for a while.” Harry grinned.

Ron could tell he wasn’t being quite honest, but Hood smiled again.

“So, let’s meet Hermione, and find out what her experiment told her,” Harry said.

Ron pointed to the woods, from which muggle soldiers emerged. “We need to talk to them first.”

Hopefully that wouldn’t take too long.

*****


Hermione Granger was double-checking the results of her spell when the glowing terrier entered her office and spoke with Ron’s voice: “We’ve driven the enemy off. Harry, I and our guest are safe.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. They were safe. The battle was won. She wiped some tears from her eyes, and drew her wand. Then she focused on the day they had pulled the soul fragment out of Harry’s scar, proving that the sealing spell she had developed worked. The smile on his face. The warmth of his and Ron’s body when she hugged them both. The kisses that had followed, and left them blinking.

A quick spell later, a silvery otter was swimming around her desk, peering at her. Her smile vanished, and she said: “Meet me at Grimmauld Place.” She sighed when the Patronus had vanished. She hated to do this - her message would already tell the boys what she had found - but this couldn’t wait.

Then she stood up, collected her notes, checked once again that her safe was hidden and the protection spells in place, and left her office. She walked down the hallway, then opened the second door on the right. “Katherine!”

The witch jerked, guilt written over her face. She should have evacuated with the rest of the Ministry. “Yes?”

“The danger should be over. I’m out of the office for the day.” Hermione stared at the witch. “Don’t let anyone inside, not even the Minister herself.”

“Of course!”

Hermione nodded and left. A minute later, she stepped out of the fireplace in Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. Angelina greeted her. “Ah… Hermione.”

“Just passing through,” Hermione said and threw the Floo Powder she had brought with her into the flames. “No. 12 Grimmauld Place.”

“Alright. I’ll see you this evening.” Angelina’s expression told Hermione that the former Chaser still thought she was paranoid. But old habits died hard. Habits that had saved her once already died even harder. Being predictable meant inviting ambushes. As did trusting too many people.

Once back in her home, she relaxed. Grimmauld Place was safe. Safer than any other place in Britain. She went to the kitchen and grabbed a soda and a sandwich. It wasn’t quite lunch yet, but she would rather eat now, and not waste time on it later. She couldn’t afford to. The Ministry wards had cost her two days.
She checked her watch - mechanical, like everything in the house. Electronics didn’t last long inside these wards. Harry and Ron were taking a long time to return. What could be holding them up? Normally, she wouldn’t worry; they would have contacted her if there was an emergency, but considering the circumstances... She was biting her lower lip, hard, and made an effort to stop before she bled. Should she have told them through the Patronus? But what if there were others when it arrived...

“Hermione?”

That was Ron! She started to run, then slowed down before she reached the entrance hall. “Ron! Harry!” She hugged them, then nodded at Hood. “Hood.”

The battlecruiser - and that was a concept Hermione still had trouble accepting, despite the evidence - nodded back, looking rather forlorn for a ship who had just won against the odds.

“She thinks she failed,” Ron explained. “We keep telling her she won, and gained us valuable time to prepare and find a better plan, but...” He shrugged. “The muggle Admiral did so as well, which is what held us up longer than anticipated.”

Harry nodded. “Sunk two escorts, drove away the Bismarck and two other escorts... and she thinks she failed.”

“I didn’t sink the Bismarck. She’ll be back.”

Harry grinned, apparently remembering that movie. Hermione glared at him, then turned to the shipgirl. “You faced an enemy that outnumbered and outclassed you, and drove them away. That’s not failing.” She sighed. “Especially in light of what I found out.”

Harry and Ron, who had been smiling at some shared joke she was not privy to, grew serious. “It’s Voldemort then.”

Hermione winced. “Yes. The spell’s results are clear. I checked twice. The Bismarck is possessed by Voldemort.”

Ron cursed, and Harry was grinding his teeth.

“Excuse me?” Hood raised her hand. “Who’s Voldemort?”

Hermione looked at Harry. Her friend sighed, and started to explain.

*****

“The fragment of the soul of an evil wizard possessed a Nazi shipgirl. A wizard who has come back from death twice before, and will return again, unless this is the last soul fragment of his.” Hood didn’t show any emotion when she summed up what Harry had told her while they ate in the kitchen. Or, in Hood’s case, devoured food as fast as they managed to cast the Doubling Charm.

“Yes.” Harry nodded. “Defeating him cost us friends and family. He took over the Ministry, but Hogwarts held out.”

“He was fixated on the school. If he had focused on us, we’d never have managed to pull off some of our missions,” Ron added.

“Do you think he’ll go after Hogwarts?”
Ron grimaced. “I don’t think so. He wasn’t a battleship before. Hogwarts is not exactly near the sea.”

“If his soul fragment merged with the ‘spirit’ of the Bismarck, then that may have influenced him and his goals as well,” Hermione said. She ignored the way Hood narrowed her eyes - she had never heard about a ship’s spirit. She knew souls existed, but ships had no souls. Their crew did though. “We don’t know enough. Did the Bismarck use any magic?”

“She seemed to control the weather. She called on a storm to arrive and leave in.” Harry frowned. “But she didn’t use a storm to drive us from the sky.”

“Did you see a wand?” Hermione made a few notes.

“No.” Harry shook his head.

“Her radar was not working during the battle. If she could use that repair magic, I think she’d have done that,” Hood said.

“If she can’t use a wand, then that will limit her,” Ron said.

“Unless one of the Death Eaters who were on Azkaban can do it for her. Him. Whatever.” Harry shrugged.

“Unprotected humans will not survive long in a battle between ships,” Hood said.

“So… tactically, she will not be able to repair damage quickly.” Ron rubbed his nose. “Strategically, though, we cannot count on her being forced to… how do you repair your rigging without magic?”

“Uhh…” Hood blinked. “I’d be repaired in a drydock, optimally. Some make-shift repairs can be done by my crew, or a repair ship, but it’s not ideal.”

Harry tapped his scar. “If Voldemort is controlling the Bismarck, and if he cannot use a wand anymore, then he might not let others use wands. He’d hate to feel inferior to anyone.”

“That would be exceptionally stupid,” Hood said. “How could such a man have taken over Magical Britain?”

Hermione nodded. “He’s not stupid. But this is not him - this is just a soul fragment. And as we noticed in our second year, those are more than a bit unstable, and not as smart as the whole, so to speak.” About as smart as magical portraits, and everyone in Gryffindor knew just how dumb those were. “So… it’s possible, but we shouldn’t count on it.”

“There were not that many Death Eaters in Azkaban anyway. Malfoy and Carrow were the only ones of note,” Ron added.

Harry nodded. “We should have killed those two as well.”

Hermione frowned. The Death Eaters had flocked to the Dark Lord every time when he had returned, and the trio had sworn early on that they wouldn’t let any Death Eater live just so they could join Voldemort for a fourth time. Alas, the two dark witches had surrendered to the Aurors after the Ministry had been retaken, and managed to avoid the Veil.

“Hindsight is… what do you call it?” Ron asked.

“20/20,” Hermione answered, reflexively. “But let us return to the main topic. We need to research
shipgirls. We really need to find out how they… appear. The Bismarck managed to procure four of them, somehow. If we cannot duplicate that…” she trailed off.

“Pensieve time?” Ron asked.

She nodded. “I’ll also need to examine you again, Hood.”

“What about the notes you found?”

Hermione winced. “My computer’s working on decrypting them.” The damned cipher had proven to be more complicated to crack than she had expected to start with, and that wasn’t counting the problem of scanning and decrypting pages handwritten on parchment. But since the cipher had been broken, it wouldn’t take much longer, though. Or so she hoped. She glared at Ron, daring him to say he told her so, but he wisely decided not to rub it in.

Drawing her wand, she smiled at the battlecruiser. “So, let’s get started.”

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Devon, Ottery St. Catchpole, May 5th 2001

Harry frowned, as he usually did when he saw the Burrow. The Weasley’s ancestral home had been destroyed during the war - fortunately without loss of life, though both Molly and Arthur had been cursed. And Bill had almost died. The eldest Weasley son hadn’t recovered until the war had been over. That was reason alone, Harry thought, to make a few changes.

But the family had chosen to rebuild it as close to how it had been as possible. The same gravity-defying house, the garden, the field… the pond behind it. And the gaping security holes in the layout. Harry and his friends had offered to pay for a better, sturdier, safer house. As safe and secure as possible for their family. But Arthur and Molly hadn’t listened. Hadn’t wanted to change it. They even had the ghoul in the attic replaced!

They tried to act, in Harry’s opinion, as if the war had never happened. But the Weasleys had changed. Even though they did their best not to show it. Which, in his opinion, made it even more obvious. They were no Slytherins, after all.

“Wow… how can that house be standing?”

Harry looked at Hood, who was standing there, gaping.

“Magic,” was Ron’s dry answer, which earned him a glare from Hermione, whose quick explanation of magical construction went over the battlecruiser’s head with a mile to spare, as far as Harry could tell.

But then, it took their mind off the upcoming dinner, which was a good thing.

Ron was the first to enter. “Mum, Dad! We’re here,” he announced. “We brought a guest too.”

Molly stepped out of a kitchen and smiled at them. Her two-stage smile, as Harry liked to think of it. She started with a shy smile, then it grew - almost, but not quite, into the smile he remembered.

“There you are! I was so worried!”

To Harry’s surprise, she came forward and hugged them all, without the slightest hesitation. She was even crying when she released him. Of course - they were at war again! Molly would have known they’d be fighting. Risking their lives again. She’d have been so worried, again. How could he have
forgotten this?

He glanced at his friends. Ron patted his mum’s back with a sheepish expression, mumbling something about everyone being alright and safe. Hermione looked like she had just remembered something obvious she had forgotten. Harry smiled - he wasn’t alone.

“Fred and George are coming with Angelina, as soon as they have closed the shop. Ginny might be a bit late, she said they have practice today. Despite, you know…” Molly frowned.

“You mean the attack?” Hood asked.

Harry closed his eyes. He should have known that the battlecruiser turned girl wasn’t subtle. Or diffident.

“You must be Hood then,” Molly said, her smile polite.

Hood, apparently oblivious, nodded emphatically. “Her Majesty’s Ship Hood, Admiral-Class battlecruiser, Royal Navy. Pennant number 51.” She beamed at the witch. “I would like to thank you for inviting me to dinner with your family!”

“Of course, dear.” Molly answered, obviously confused. Apparently, Arthur hadn’t told her what was going on. Swell.

Ron stepped into the breach. “She’s the one who fought the enemy this morning, preventing another attack on the Ministry.”

“I wasn’t alone, Ron and Harry fought bravely! As did the Royal Artillery,” Hood said, smiling brightly. “Your son was very courageous, Ma’am, attacking those monsters!”

“What?” Molly gasped, staring at the battlecruiser. Then she stared at Ron. Then at Harry. “What did you do?”

“They provided air cover while I engaged the Bismarck and her escorts, Ma’am.”

“The thing that laid waste to London?” Molly asked, trembling. Harry quickly conjured a chair for her.

Hood blinked. “Ah… you didn’t know?”

Hermione was rubbing her temple and Ron was once again hugging his mum. Fortunately, Arthur arrived at this moment, so he could take the blame.

It took five minutes to explain Hood’s presence, and fifteen minutes to calm down Molly. Fortunately, the witch understood the need for secrecy. Although the look she shot at Harry told him that she hadn’t forgotten what secrets he and his friends had kept from her in the last war. She wouldn’t bring it up though - Ron’s mum had learned that confronting the three of them about what they did - and now would do - in war was a fast way to ruin a family gathering. Like asking Molly and Arthur to be more security-conscious, as Hermione put it.

“Bill’s not coming,” Molly said as they helped set the table. “Too dangerous, with the recent attack, they said.” She sighed. “I can’t fault Fleur for that. Not with…” She shook her head. Neither of the three chose to comment on the fact that Fleur didn’t consider the Burrow safe enough for her family. Not after she had dragged her fiancé out of the ruins.

“We’ll do our best to defeat the enemy, ma’am!” Hood cut in, turning away from the family clock
she had been examining.

“That’s nice, dear,” Molly said. “Charlie can’t make it, but he’s taking time off from work to visit as soon as possible.”

Harry nodded. Everyone knew there was only one thing Charlie would leave his beloved dragons for - his family’s safety.

Fred, George and Angelina arrived on time, and the mood lifted, as usual with the twins. They hadn’t changed much, though their humour had become a bit darker. And, of course, they didn’t sell love potions in their shop. Not anymore.

“And who are you?” Fred grinned at Hood. “Did the ménage à trois expand into a ménage à quatre?” The twins were also the only ones who made jokes about the trio’s love life.

Hood looked confused. “Pardon?”

“Well, it’s a family gathering, so you must be related to a Weasley. Since I know we didn’t bring you, and mum didn’t tell us they had taken someone in, and Ginny doesn’t bring her friends to our gatherings, that leaves the trio here. Are you their ‘plus one’?”

“Err… I’m staying with them. It would be irresponsible to leave their side, in case there’s an… a situation,” Hood said, with a forced smile. She understood secrecy, Harry knew, but cover stories seemed to elude her still. “I’m Hood.”

“Let’s eat now!” Molly interrupted the beginning interrogation, to Harry’s relief. For once, the witch’s unwillingness to talk about the trio’s ‘arrangement’ worked out in their favor.

Of course, Hood’s appetite caught the attention of everyone at the table, despite the battlecruiser having ‘refueled’ at Grimmauld Place already. Hermione had to tell the twins not to butt into ‘Unspeakable business’ to make them drop the matter - and only after far too much innuendo and jokes about ‘Unspeakables’ and ‘Unmentionables’.

And then Ginny arrived, and Hood was given the third degree again, since the youngest Weasley wasn’t about to let some ‘blonde stranger’ take advantage of her friends and brother.

All in all, it was the most relaxing Weasley family dinner Harry had had in some time.

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North Sea, Azkaban, May 5th, 2001

Even hours after the battle, she was still filled with rage. Ambushed by an outdated battlecruiser! Driven to flight, even, by a ship she had sunk in three minutes before! Almost crippled by treachery!

The perfidious Albion had shown their true nature once again!

But so had others! She ground her teeth at the cowardice Narcissa had shown on the field of battle, fleeing without orders instead of pressing the attack! She wanted to go and punish the craven cruiser again, but that would mean she would have to leave this soothing bath and feel the pain from her damaged hull and superstructure again - she had already worsened her damage when she had beaten the ship bloody.

Leaning back against the bathtub’s edge, she calmed down. She had lost a battle, but not the war. She would fix her wounds, and then she would go and gather a real fleet. There wouldn’t be any more experiments with turning witches into warships. No, her comrades, the warriors who had fallen
in battle against England would rise again, more terrifying than before!

As she should have done before, she would go north, where half the Kriegsmarine was resting.

Resting, and waiting.

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Chapter 5: Reinforcements

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 6th, 2001

When HMS Hood had heard Hermione needed to run a few experiments with her, she had expected to be on the sea, demonstrating her guns, and her speed, and her armour. She hadn’t expected to sit on a chair or stand around for hours, only moving when told to while the witch was waving her wand around and casting spell after spell, in between dictating notes to a self-writing quill.

“Harry and Ron already tested me,” she said, frowning.

Hermione sighed. “While I love the two dearly, they are not - boffins, you’d say.”

“And you are?” Hood peered at the girl. She didn’t look like a scientist. No lab coat, even. But she certainly acted like some of the scientists Hood faintly remembered.

“I’m the closest to a boffin you’ll find in Wizarding Britain.” The girl sounded both sad and proud at the same time. And angry, though Hood couldn’t tell what made her angry. Apart from the mystery of her existence, and Hermione’s continued lack of understanding thereof. The witch’s mutterings had made that clear.

“But you ran tests yesterday. So, why aren’t we out on the sea now?” In her natural element. Even water beds - marvelous as they were - were a pale imitation of real sailing.

“Because those tests revealed that you have an obvious dual nature, and my theory is that it depends on whether or not you’re acting like a ship, or a girl. After I finish my tests here, we’ll head to a secluded spot on the coast, and repeat the tests with you in your ‘rigging’, as you call it.”

Hood blinked. It sounded as if the girl had found a way to make sailing less comfortable! “Shouldn’t we work on finding ways to sink the Bismarck instead?”

“That’s part of what we are doing.” Hermione held up a 12.7×81mm 50-calibre bullet, one of Hood’s Vickers. “This has been created like the shells the Bismarck fired at London.”

“I’m not like her!” Hood stood up, glaring at the witch. To be compared to such… to that Nazi abomination!

“You’re more alike than you think,” Hermione said. “You both represent the ‘spirits’ of a sunk warship. You both can walk on water, and use magic to reproduce the firepower of the sunk ships. And you both fight in similar ways.”

“She’s a Nazi monster! I’m a ship of the Royal Navy!”

“Yes.” Hermione took another note.

Hood craned her neck, but from her angle she couldn’t read it. “And you know all my weaknesses!” Her weak deck armour, her lack of a real refit… it had been humiliating to list that.

“No, we know the weaknesses of the battlecruiser you were. Not the weaknesses of the being you are now.” Hermione looked at her. “We need to know if there are magical ways to hurt you. Spells, potions, enchanted weapons.”
“A big gun will hurt me!” Hood said.

“Maybe even a handgun will hurt you - if it’s enchanted correctly.”

Hood scoffed. “I won’t even feel that. In fact, I didn’t feel your magic sling.” She grinned.

The witch frowned. “That wasn’t a magic sling, but a spell. A Banishing Charm, to be precise.”

Hood shrugged. “You shot a rock at me, it bounced off. Looks like a sling to me.” Hermione scowled. That was a hit! “Nor did your ‘Piercing Curse’ hurt me.” They hadn’t tested a ‘Blasting Curse’, yet.

The girl cleared her throat. “You said you were called. That means someone, or something called you. We need to find out how this happened, so we can duplicate it.”

Hood understood that. She needed a fleet to sink the Bismarck, especially if the Nazi battleship had escorts. Or, worse, more capital ships. “Good.” And it would be very nice to have… well, she never had a sistership, but she had friends. After the dinner with Ron’s family, she had realised just how much she missed having friends around. A family.

“No, it’s not good. I’m not making any progress there. Other than something rather worrying.” Hermione seemed to hesitated a second, then sighed. “You said you identified two of the escorts you fought.”


“I looked them up. Both were sunk with most or all of their crew.” Hermione kept looking at her.

Hood met her gaze. “Like I was. And Bismarck.”

“Yes.” Hermione sighed. “It might be coincidence, of course. You didn’t recognise the light cruisers, after all.”

She scoffed. “Those were crewed by amateurs or fools. They would never have made the cut in the Royal Navy. Their captains should have been court-martialed.”

“But you didn’t recognise the design.”

Hood shook her head, her ponytail whipping around. “No, I didn’t. Were they built after I sank?”

“No. The Kriegsmarine didn’t build any light cruisers during the war. They only built the Emden, Königsberg, Karlsruhe, Köln, Leipzig and Nürnberg.”

“Oh.” Hood didn’t understand that. “Maybe they were captured ships. Definitely light cruisers though.”

“Maybe.” Hermione didn’t look convinced. “In any case, it is obviously possible to call more of those ships. So, it should be possible to call more of your type of shipgirl. We just have to find out how.”

From the look in the witch’s eyes, Hood could tell that this would be a long day.

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London, City of Westminster, May 6th, 2001
“This is excellent, Ron. Do you eat here often?”

Ron Weasley smiled at his father. “Not that often. It was a favourite of Hermione’s parents and she took us here a few times.”

“Ah.” The older Weasley nodded and took another bite from his entrecôte.

“How are the muggles handling the current crisis?” Ron asked mostly to break the silence - he expected that he’d have been informed if there was anything important happening, since he and his friends were still ready to transport Hood should she be needed.

“They’re sticking to their story of a terrorist attack, and also claim that another attack was prevented yesterday.” With a shrug, the older wizard added: “I don’t know how plausible it is - the Prime Minister seemed less than convinced that the reporters would believe it.”

Another minute passed until Ron’s dad spoke again: “Harry’s at the Ministry.”

Ron nodded. “He’s keeping an eye on Dawlish, and the reports from the pickets near Azkaban.”

“And Hermione is examining Hood while you are keeping an eye on the muggles through me.”

“That’s the gist of it.” Ron shrugged. He had a cellphone to keep in contact with the muggle military as well, but his father knew that.

The older wizard sighed. “Ron… you don’t have to fight this battle alone. You are not alone.”

Ron frowned, and fought down the sudden burst of anger that rose inside him. “Old habits die hard.” With a scoff he added: “It’s not as if things changed much. Bloody Ministry’s still useless. And there’s no one else. Like usual.”

He couldn’t keep the scorn out of his voice.

His father pressed his lips together and took a deep breath. “We worry about you.”

Ron knew he should let the matter drop, but he couldn’t. “Like you ‘worried’ in our sixth year, when you did all you could to keep us from fighting Voldemort? You almost lost us the war!”

“We didn’t know, Ron.”

“You didn’t want to listen. Not to a few children. You all thought you knew better. Despite Dumbledore’s notes.” Ron wasn’t eating anymore. “We had to do everything alone. Malfoy Manor. Gringotts. Nott. No one but Sirius helped us there.” He scoffed. “You even believed that we just wanted to avenge Dumbledore.”

“We didn’t believe that!” His dad was raising his voice now as well.

“The Order did! We heard McGonagall talk to Kingsley when we were hiding from the Aurors.”

“If she had believed that, she’d have informed the Aurors that you had been the ones to kill Lucius.” The older wizard sighed and closed his eyes. “Merlin! You just told us that the Dark Lord wasn’t dead, and that you had a secret mission from Dumbledore. And then you started killing. Or so it looked to us,” he added, before Ron could tell him that they had searched for the Horcruxes. “And why would Dumbledore have given such a mission to a group of children, instead of to the Order? It didn’t make sense, Ron!”

“We couldn’t tell you about it! The risk of someone leaking the information was too great.” Ron
snorted. “Something you should have been familiar with from the last war.”

“We had no traitor in our ranks this time.”

“You don’t need a traitor. You just need a prisoner and some Veritaserum. Or torture.” That was how they had found out how to get into the home of Nott.

Ron’s dad sighed, but but didn’t contest that.

“And if the Order had killed a few Death Eaters earlier, maybe more of you would have survived when you finally started fighting,” Ron said, and immediately regretted it. “Sorry.”

Arthur nodded, slowly, but didn’t say anything. There hadn’t been many members left. McGonagall, Flitwick, and the Weasleys had been the only survivors when Kingsley had disbanded it after the Ministry had been retaken. And Ron was convinced the Weasleys had just survived because the entrance they had been holding hadn’t been attacked by the main force of the Death Eaters, but the vampires and werewolves. A diversion, Harry had called it. Something else no one ever mentioned at a family gathering.

The two resumed eating, and stayed silent for a few minutes. Then Arthur tried again. “Ron… it’s different this time. No one is doubting you. We want to help you. Even the Ministry is doing what they can.”

Ron scoffed. “They can’t do much. Early warnings is about the best they can do. And they hate us. Or why do you think Rita Skeeter gets away with her lies and slander?”

“I don’t think that’s the reason, Ron. Three people living together like you are… people are not used to that kind of arrangement.”

He glared at his father. “How we live is no one’s business but our own! We’re happy, and that’s all that counts!”

His dad hesitated, then said: “But are you really happy?”

Ron closed his eyes so he’d not lose his temper. “Dad, it works for us. This is not just a ‘war thing’, as Mum put it. It started when we were on the run from everyone, yes, but wouldn’t you expect us to have broken up by now, if that had been all it was?”

“I’m not certain you ever returned from the war, Ron,” his dad said so softly, Ron almost didn’t hear it.

They spent the rest of the meal in silence.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 6th, 2001

“Alright, we’re done with the tests. Thank you for being so patient.” Hermione Granger smiled at Hood. She was quite certain that the battlecruiser had hated every minute of the tests - at least those that had required her to stay still. “It’ll take a while until I have the results though.”

“Don’t mention it. I know how important this is.” The battlecruiser nodded at the witch, but did leave rather quickly.

Hermione kept her smile up until the door had closed behind Hood, then sighed. While it was true
that she wouldn’t have the final results until she would have finished analysing the data in detail, the preliminary results were rather conclusive.

She pressed her lips together while she looked at her notes. While she still didn’t know how exactly Hood had been created, or ‘called’, as the ship described the experience, everything she had tested pointed at a necromantic ritual as the source. Soul magic.

Hermione was more than passingly familiar with this field of magic - she had studied it in depth to create the ritual they had used to seal Voldemort’s shade. She had researched death and souls extensively.

And Hood’s existence was tightly linked to a lot of both. Not like a Horcrux. But there were some parallels. Hermione was certain that without a lot of deaths, the ship’s spirit, shade, or soul, whatever it was, wouldn’t have been formed.

Unfortunately, she didn’t know if that meant the Bismarck’s spirit would return after sinking once again. Or if the they would be able to seal it. That would require more study.

But she needed to find out how Hood had been called first, before making plans about dealing with the Bismarck. Harry and Ron had mentioned new plans, but she knew them. They didn’t think it would be enough. They needed more shipgirls to win in the first place.

Hermione checked her watch. It was past lunchtime. She would get something on the way to her grandmother’s house.

A few hours later, the witch was back at Grimmauld Place, poring over the finally deciphered notes of Alois Fickleton. Unfortunately, the Seer’s writings were not as clear or precise as she had hoped. And they were extensive. Very extensive. The man rambled over pages and pages of notes, going into details of spells any student learned these days in their N.E.W.T. year. But she had found the crucial passage:

“There will appear an enemy, full of rage for past grievances against them and theirs. They will rain down fire and destruction on the Ministry from the air and from afar, their attacks so mighty, many muggles will be killed just for being nearby - just as they have been killed before. Normal means will be useless against this foe reborn from death and dark magic.

Such I was told as having said. As having seen. Such I have studied. An enemy, impervious to our magic. Commanding the air. Able to lay waste to both wizard and muggle buildings. A danger unlike any we have seen so far - and yet familiar. Reborn. The conclusion is clear, though the solution remains elusive. Without being able to study this enemy in detail, I will not be able to prepare a spell to deal with them. Not usually, at least.

But I am not just a Seer, but also the Head Unspeakable. An unknown danger can be dealt with, if I approach the problem from a different angle. A different concept, even.’

Hermione eagerly read ahead, skimming pages of speculation and arithmantic calculations until she reached the notes detailing the spell that Fickleton had inscribed on that stone she had found. This was what she had been looking for. This would… She blinked, then cursed. Loudly.

“I’ve found the spell the Unspeakable used to call Hood,” Hermione announced during dinner. “But we can’t use it as it was cast.”
“Why?” Ron frowned. “You just said it called Hood.”

Hermione sighed. “It did. But Fickleton didn’t create a spell to summon a battleship in the form of a girl. He created a spell to summon an enemy of the enemy he had ‘seen’.” She snorted. “So, his spell reacted to and needed the Bismarck to be attacking.” She scoffed. “He didn’t even know that it would be a shipgirl. He thought it would be a dragon, undead or resurrected. Incidentally, he didn’t seem trust his own spell that much either - he’s the reason we have no dragon reserves in Britain anymore.”

“So… how long until you have his spell adapted to work as we need it?” Ron’s tone and smile left no doubt that he was certain of her success.

Hermione smiled, tiredly. “I’ll do my best, but I’ll have to focus the spell on shipgirls, and I’ll have to find a way to make it work without having an enemy present.” She didn’t mention the other conditions. The need for a ship to have sunk with many of its crew. The necromantic aspects. She didn’t know how Hood would take that. But she knew Harry would react - he would blame himself for destroying the Resurrection Stone, should he know the ritual would involve souls.

No, she would keep quiet about this. And do her best. As usual.

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Repair work on the building was continuing rapidly, Harry Potter noted when he walked through the atrium. Not that he had expected anything else - the damage it had taken when they had stormed it after the Battle of Hogwarts had been repaired in less than a day. The physical damage, at least - the deaths hadn’t stopped hurting. They had found Percy lying in a pool of blood, his lungs rotted away, in the Floo Network Authority’s offices, where he had opened the connections for them. There hadn’t been much quarter granted to anyone following that. And Ron had been a wreck for weeks, afterwards. Harry sighed - he and Hermione had comforted their friend. But sometimes he wondered if they should have retreated to Grimmauld Place, instead of back to Hogwarts, where the rest of the Weasleys had been.

When he waited for the lift he noted to his surprise that Aubrey Fawley chose to wait next to him. Usually, Harry and Ron had a lift to themselves. He let his wand slip into his hand. Just in case.

“Dreadful business, this attack,” the older wizard said while the doors opened.

“Yes.” Harry glanced at the man.

“Kingsley dead… I couldn’t believe it.” Fawley shook his head. “Everyone thought he’d stay Minister for a few more years, at least.”

The political shuffling had started, Harry realised. He had expected that many would not want to step forward and campaign for the post, not in the middle of the current crisis. The Ministry under attack, the Statute threatened - those were not the kind of things a Minister would want to deal with at the start of their first term. Or at any other time. Unless of course they wouldn’t have much of a chance to get elected in normal times. He nodded. “I’m certain we’ll have a new minister soon,” he said. “I doubt that Selwyn would want to stay acting Minister for much longer.”

“Precisely!” Fawley said, beaming. “But picking the next Minister is a delicate affair. It has to be someone who can lead us in this crisis. Someone with the full support of everyone in the Ministry.”

“It should be someone who can work closely with the muggle Minister,” Harry said. “This crisis
cannot be stopped by the Ministry alone. Without muggles, the last attack couldn’t have been stopped.”

“The last attack?” Fawley asked with wide eyes.

“Yes, there was another attack yesterday morning. It was stopped before it reached London, though.” Harry smiled. “So, it’s imperative that the new Minister is well-versed with muggle customs.”

The lift reached the floor of the Auror offices before Fawley recovered enough to continue their discussion.

Harry had barely entered the offices when one of the new Aurors informed him that Dawlish wanted to talk to him as soon as possible. He still checked his mail and memos before he went to the Head Auror’s office.

Dawlish didn’t comment on his late arrival. “There you are, Potter. Have a seat.”

Harry nodded and sat down.

“I’ve read your report about the battle yesterday. Two of those creatures killed. The other three driven off. And a horde of Inferi destroyed. Good work.”

Harry shrugged. “We failed to destroy the main threat. They’ll be back.”

“They’re still on Azkaban. We’re keeping an eye on them.”

“That’s a dangerous and difficult mission.”

Dawlish waved his hand. “They stay out of range, and simply observe. A bit more uncomfortable than a normal stakeout.”

Harry didn’t think that scouting an enemy in a war was comparable to staking out a criminal’s hideout, but didn’t think it was worth starting a dispute. He’d check with the Corps later, to see how the pickets were organised.

Dawlish pulled out a parchment and handed it to him. “The team examining the remains from the first attack has raised the possibility that this was done by holdouts from Grindelwald. Possibly Prussian muggleborns who escaped after his defeat with the help of muggles.”

Harry laughed out loud. “Really?” He shook his head. “Didn’t they listen to Hermione? Grindelwald wasn’t involved with the Nazis. No, we’re still investigating, but it looks like this is the work of surviving Death Eaters.”

“What?” Dawlish bared his teeth. “The Death Eaters are gone. There’s no one left!”

“There were several left, on Azkaban.” Harry smiled briefly.

“Have you any proof for this… theory? Or is this some ploy to discredit Macmillan?” Dawlish narrowed his eyes.

“Macmillan’s running for Minister?” Harry scoffed. “Bloody idiot.” He shrugged. “No, we don’t have proof yet. But we’re working on it.” They couldn’t tell anyone that Voldemort’s shade was kept in a crystal in the Department of Mysteries because his soul could not pass over. Much less how they had achieved that. That kind of magic was highly illegal. And very dangerous.
Dawlish didn’t look convinced, but nodded. “See that you do.”

“We’re focusing on stopping the threat. We can examine the remains afterwards.” Harry grinned. “We need those pickets to stay sharp too, so we know when the enemy’s moving again.”

“They’ll do their job. Do you need anything else?”

He shook his head. “Not at the moment, no.” It was up to Hermione to crack that spell. Or craft it. Like in the war. She had cast the sealing spell twice - once to deal with the soul shard in his scar, and once when Voldemort had walked into their trap at Hogwarts. Or rather, had been lured into it. In hindsight, that had been a far too dangerous plan, but they had been desperate at that point. He stood up. “I’ll be going then.”

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He was on the way to the Floo connections in the atrium when he heard his name being called out. “Harry!”

He turned around, wand slipping into his hand, tense, before he recognised the voice. “Luna?”

The blonde witch beamed at him while she crossed the atrium. “Yes.”

“I thought you were still tracking the Jackalope in America.”

She shook her head, sending her ponytail swishing around. “How could I track an animal that will still be there for years when Britain is experiencing an invasion by spirits? I had to return so I could study them before you destroy them!”

“Ah…” Harry was at a loss for words. Luna wanted to study those monsters? That would be far too dangerous! But how to explain it...

“And I wanted to meet the exorcist you have found!”

“The what?” Harry’s train of thoughts was getting derailed.

“I heard that you have a blonde witch as a guest, and she isn’t me. Which means she had to be important for the invasion. Otherwise you’d not have taken her to your home, much less let her stay. And since we’re being attacked by spirits, the most plausible explanation is that she’s an exorcist!”

Harry stared at his friend. Hermione would… well, she’d act annoyed, but she liked Luna. Or she’d have never agreed to let her have a guest room at Grimmauld Place. “Let’s talk about this at Grimmauld Place. Incidentally, do you know anything about magical ships?”

Luna blinked. “Is Britain under attack by the Flying Dutchman? Do you plan to steal the Ship of Durmstrang to fight it?”

Harry winced. He should have never told Luna about Gringotts.

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**Thames Estuary, Britain, May 6th, 2001**

HMS Hood was happy. After all those tests, hours spent either standing still or following rather
unorthodox orders while Hermione waved her wand around and muttered incomprehensibly or took notes, she was finally back on the open sea. Or at least as open as the Thames Estuary. But she could sail! And what a joy was it, to sail, with her hull as pristine as if she had just been built, and all of her systems working perfectly!

She smiled widely while she took a tight turn, leaving a wake behind her. Her directors tracked the aeroplanes in the sky as well - purely as an exercise. Not that any were in range of her 4-inchers. The only flying contact in range was Ron, who was flying behind her on his broom. Just in case she needed to be deployed somewhere else.

Which was not impossible, given magic. If the Bismarck could use magic to repair herself, or if some of those ‘Death Eaters’ were repairing her… She frowned. If her nemesis had that kind of support, she would not have sailed, but been apparated right into the middle of London!

Hood took a deep breath. Sooner or later she’d have to face the Nazi battleship again. And the two surviving escorts. And whatever other ships that monster managed to procure. As if she wasn’t powerful enough by herself!

She wished the Royal Navy was with her. The Navy she knew. Her comrades in arms. Not this gutted Royal Navy of the twenty-first century. That had discarded so many of the ships who had sailed with her, sent them to the scrapyard as if they were rubbish! And so many had sunk during the war. Reading those histories had been painful.

She closed her eyes. She knew she was not fair. Almost childish even. Times had changed. The age of the battleship had passed long ago - shortly after her sinking, to be exact. And the Royal Navy had adapted, just as it had adapted to the end of the age of sail. Still… she couldn’t help feeling that this wasn’t her Navy. And not just because she was now a girl as well as a ship.

No, she couldn’t even mingle with them because most of them were not allowed to know about her. You could not belong to a Navy like that.

“Is something wrong?” Ron asked suddenly, surprising her.

She hadn’t noticed he was closing in. Sloppy! She turned around to face him. “No, I’m just… missing my comrades. The ships I knew.” My family, she added, silently.

“Oh.” Ron nodded slowly. He was sitting up on his broom, one hand on the handle. It looked very uncomfortable to Hood, but magic probably took care of that. Magic could do a lot, Hood knew. But it couldn’t beat the Bismarck.

“You miss them.”

“Yes.”

“I understand.” The wizard sighed. “There are a lot of people I miss. The dead, and the… well, distant.”

Hood turned and started to slow down, circling around him while she came to a stop. She knew about missing the dead - all too well. But… “The distant?”

He shrugged. “We’re not as close to our families as we were, before the war. You probably have noticed during dinner that the mood was a bit strained at times.”

She hadn’t, actually. Compared to some captain’s dinners, the mood had been very familial. She
nodded anyway. It seemed the thing to do.

He sighed. “We’ve changed, and they don’t like it.” He shook his head. “They’ll come around. At
least my family. Hermione’s though… they already have trouble dealing with magic. Dealing with us
and our relationship…” He sighed again, louder.

“Ah.” Hood was not quite certain what the family was objecting to - times had changed in that area
as well, as she had found out when she had read a few magazines.

Before she could decide if she should ask for a more in-depth explanation, her radar picked up two
contacts approaching her. She turned around, and her 4-inchers swiveled to target them. “Two
brooms flying towards us,” she informed Ron, as soon as she had visual confirmation.

“Two brooms? Must be important if Hermione’s flying that far out.” Ron straightened.

It wasn’t Hermione. Unless she had dyed and straightened her hair. And dyed her robe. The other
broom rider was Harry, so Hood relaxed a bit.

“Luna?”

“Hi Ron!” the other witch yelled, waving so wildly, Hood feared she might slide off her broom into
the water.

Swimming in those robes would be hard. Unless there was magic to help, Hood thought.

“Hi Miss Hood! I’m Luna Lovegood! I’m so excited to meet you! You’re the first spirit I can
interview - the ones in America vanished when I saw them, for some reason! Do you remember how
you were born? And what made you take this form? Were you in love with your captain, and wished
to be a girl? Or were you cursed by a jealous mermaid, hoping to banish you to forever to the
shores?”

The battlecruiser blinked. She saw Harry smile and shrug to Ron, who was smiling and shaking his
head.

“Hood, meet Luna. One of our closest friends.”

Hood turned her attention back to the witch, who was poking with her wand at the battlecruiser’s
rigging. “Oh… are those crewed? Maybe with tiny spirits? Or are they alive? Or is it a part of you,
controlled like an extra appendage? Or is this your true form, and the body we see is just an
illusion?”

Luna, Hood decided right then and there, certainly was not one of the ‘distant’ Ron had talked about.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 6th, 2001

“... and have you ever heard of Nargles? Those are tiny invisible animals, kind of like your crew, if
you had one, I mean.”

Ron Weasley smiled to himself when he left Hood and Luna in the living room of the house. It was
good to see the blonde witch again - of all their friends and family, she was the only one who had
never judged them, no matter what they had done - killing, lying, living together. She had been one
of the few they had been able to trust in their sixth year.
“Is Hermione still at the Ministry?” Harry asked as Ron was passing the kitchen.

“Yes.” He stopped and entered. His friend was making pasta. “She wanted to do some research in the Unspeakables’ Library, after she had poked and prodded Hood for much of the day.”

“She hasn’t copied that one yet?”

Ron sighed. “Some of the enchantments are giving her trouble. And with all the rest…” He shook his head. Some of the Unspeakables had taken their knowledge into the grave… or into the Veil, in the case of some. Those experiments with muggles and muggleborns… “Should I go and fetch her before she forgets the time?”

Harry briefly stopped cutting the vegetables. “I don’t think so. She’ll come home to examine or experiment on Hood, at least.”

Both men chuckled. “Hood will probably be relieved. Luna’s interviewing her at the moment,” Ron said.

“More like interrogating her.” Harry laughed. “She already interrogated me.”

“Well, she always does that after returning from one of her trips.” Luna was spending a lot of time in foreign countries. And she usually stayed at Grimmauld Place when she was in Britain. He doubted Luna had spent more than a few months in total at the Rook. After her father had been killed by the Lestranges, she hadn’t had anyone left, and Ron knew how she hated to be alone.

“She cut this one short, once she heard about Hood,” Harry said. “She’s agreed not to publish anything until we’ve cleared it though.”

“Good.” Ron doubted that the Bismarck read The Quibbler, but other dark wizards did. “How are the muggles reacting to the battles?”

“Well, the newspapers are all over the place with their editorials and reports. The massive rocket bombardment couldn’t be covered up, and everyone is speculating what they fired at. The government just said that there was a classified operation, but that only fueled the rumours.” Harry pointed at a stack of muggle newspapers. “I bought one of every one. For our library.”

Ron eyed the stacked paper, and shook his head. “As long as they don’t suspect magic…”

“Some do, but no one is taking them seriously.”

For a moment, Ron felt some sympathy for those people. To be correct, but nobody of consequence believing you… he and his friends had been there. Then he remembered what would probably happen if magic was revealed. Hermione had thought a lot about that. She had said so, and neither Harry nor Ron had ever asked her about it, but Ron was certain that she had been pondering how best to reveal magic. Back after the war, when Wizarding Britain had not wanted to forget it had ever happened. The witch had come to the conclusion that revealing magic would cost a lot of lives, for various reasons. He didn’t doubt her reasoning.

Ron checked his watch. “If she’s not here at six I’ll fetch her.” He had worked up an appetite trailing Hood. “Until then, I’ll make certain that Luna doesn’t drive Hood mad. The girl’s still not used to being human, after all.”

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 7th, 2001
Hermione Granger stared at her notes, which filled an enlarged parchment that covered the biggest table in the Black Library. She had to solve this. Everyone depended on her. Somewhere in the North Sea, maybe on Azkaban, was the Bismarck, possessed by Voldemort’s soul fragment, preparing to attack Britain again. She was probably creating more monsters already. Hood alone wouldn’t be able to stop her. The wizards were not enough - Harry and Ron’s efforts had proved that. They needed help. More shipgirls. But she didn’t know how to call or create more of them.

It was not as bad as back in the war though, when she had been under similar pressure. Not as hopeless. And not as questionable. She shuddered, remembering when she had touched Voldemort’s soul while sealing it. She knew the price for the dark arts, and would never follow in his footsteps. Not for anyone.

“Hermione!”

She jerked, almost ruining the word she was writing, and turned her head. “Is the Bismarck attacking again?” she asked.

Her friend blinked. “No, I don’t think so.”

Hermione relaxed some, and checked the clock. It wasn’t time for dinner, yet.

“What are you doing?” Luna peered at her notes, her long hair almost but not quite brushing over the parchment.

“I’m trying to reverse-engineer the spell that created Hood.” Hermione pointed at the centre part. “Unfortunately, the spell that was triggered was prepared by a Seer, and the notes are rather vague. The spell was dependent on several conditions been met. Recreating the exact circumstances, much less the runes used are nigh-impossible. So, I’ve been working from the other end.”

“There’s a lot of death there,” Luna said, twisting a strand of her hair around her left index. She didn’t say it with even a hint of the disapproval or concern that, in Hermione’s opinion, many others would have shown.

The witch took a deep breath. “I’m certain that the spell needs that to work. Hood was sunk with all but three of her crew. 1418 men died with her. There’s a lot of power in that many deaths. But I don’t understand how that power was used.” Using past deaths for magic instead of sacrifices was not possible, according to her research. Many wizards had tried. Though none of them had used sunken warships. “I’ve recreated the part that gives a ship a human form.” That had been easy, comparatively. Advanced Transfiguration - Conjuration, in this case. “Even the rigging, in theory. But the spark, the soul that turns it from animated matter into a creature, a shipgirl… It has to be tied to the dead crew. But I don’t know how. I’m not certain that anyone knows.” With the possible exception of the Bismarck. Creating life like this was the stuff of legends. All the magically created species had had living animals or humans as a base.

“Did you try asking the dead?” Luna cocked her head sideways.

“What?” Hermione wondered if Luna knew about the Resurrection Stone. “I doubt even the Seer who cast the original spell knew what he was doing. I do not think the human crew would have known.”

“They say ghosts are the results of wizards or witches being too afraid of dying. I’m not quite certain. Binns doesn’t seem as if he had been afraid of dying. I think he just wanted to keep teaching. Many dead would like to return. Finish what they left. Help those who remain.” Luna smiled. “Asking them nicely might do the trick.”
Hermione blinked. It was absurd. You couldn’t ask the dead. But… the Hood had said she had been called back. Returned to do her duty. She had been sunk trying to protect Britain. Her crew had died with the same mission. Then, after decades, the Bismarck had returned, in a warped, different form, but still the battleship they had fought… When she had attacked, a spell had been triggered that had depended on Wizarding Britain needing help against an enemy as well. That had called Hood. This spell was the key. If Hermione tweaked that, implemented this aspect… Her eyes widened when she realised what was missing.

“Thank you, Luna!” she said while she hugged the girl.

“It was my pleasure,” Luna said, smiling serenely.

Hermione was already rushing to the back of the library. She now knew what she had to do! She only hoped she would have enough time left.

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North Cape, Norway, May 8th, 2001

Bismarck smiled as she slowly came to a stop in the middle of the ocean. She had arrived. Here, beneath the waves of the Barents Sea, was the resting place of the ship she had traveled so far north to call. She was like her little sister, and had suffered a fate just like her own. Sent out to hunt merchant ships, she had been separated from her escorts, and hunted down by superior forces. Fighting against all odds, she had been sunk, together with almost all of her crew.

Her most recent additions, Friedrich Eckoldt and Z26, were circling around her. The two destroyers had found their end in these waters as well, and were still adjusting to having been returned to serve. They were eager though - Friedrich Eckoldt had been sunk without even fighting back, completely surprised when the ship she had thought was a German cruiser had turned out to be the HMS Sheffield.

They were not as eager as Blücher, the heavy cruiser on her left flank. She had been sunk by outdated coastal artillery in her very first battle. To erase that shame and humiliation, the cruiser would do anything, Bismarck knew. The battleship had had to use force to keep the girl from attacking Norway right after she had been raised, and the ship had been restless ever since.

The three destroyers she had brought from Narvik, Erich Giese, Wilhelm Heidkamp and Anton Schmitt, were more disciplined. All three were guarding the fuel Bismarck had brought with her. Not all of the ships she had hoped to find had been able to return. Some had been broken up, scrapped. Nothing for the souls of the dead to hold on to but the spirit of the ship. If there had been such souls in the first place - many ships had been beached or scuttled, the crew escaping as the ships were destroyed. Those needed fuel to be called back, and even then, they would be weaker than the others.

Not as weak as Narcissa though, Bismarck knew that thanks to Friedrich Eckoldt. The destroyer had been beached in the Battle of Narvik. Her crew had escaped to fight on land while she had been destroyed. She was eager, if a bit clumsy, but by no means as inexperienced as Narcissa and Alecto had been after they had been created. Although that could have been due to the fuel used to form her - the sacrifices had been muggles, but they had been sailors at least. Comrades of the fishermen still huddled together in the lifeboat towed by Erich Giese. Or it might have been because her wreck had not been scrapped. More experimentation was needed, Bismarck knew that. Fortunately, there was no shortage of subjects for such experiments - there were many ships who had been scrapped, and there were many muggles to use.
This ship here wouldn’t be weak though, or require such fuel. 1932 men had died here, in the icy waters. Bismarck could feel their souls crying out for vengeance. And vengeance she’d grant them. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, and reached out to her kin. Down deep, she felt the ship stir. Wake. Become aware. And rise from her grave.

Soon, a head broke the surface in front of her, followed by a pale body. Shorter than hers, not as curvy either, but hard and lean. Cold eyes met hers.

Bismarck smiled. “Welcome back, Scharnhorst.”

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Chapter 6: Reunions

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 8th, 2001

“We’ve lost her,” Harry Potter said, shaking his head. He was smiling, though, as he looked at Hermione’s working room in Grimmauld Place. She had moved what looked like half the books of their library there, and was scribbling notes down while frantically using both a slide ruler and an abacus.

“Oh, yes. Who’s on feeding duty?” Ron leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed, and smirked. “I’m with Hood, and she wants to go out.”

“I’m expected at the Ministry,” Harry countered. “And Hermione will be needing Hood anyway.”

“I can feed her!”

Harry turned around and saw that Luna had managed to sneak up on both him and Ron again. He didn’t know how she did it - since Malfoy Manor, no one had managed to sneak up on them. He still felt guilty that he hadn’t been at Hogsmeade, or maybe Sirius and Remus would still be alive…

“Alright.” He smiled at the blonde witch. “But don’t just feed her sweets.”

Luna laughed. “She won’t let me!” Then she scrunched her nose and touched her finger to her lips. “Though it may be good for her - sweets give you lots of energy for studying!”

“Start with sandwiches, please. There are some in the icebox.”

“Reminds me of our seventh year,” Ron said, still looking at Hermione. “Right after Hogsmeade.”

Luna cocked her head sideways. “That was when you found the way to seal Voldemort.”

“She found it,” Harry said. “I was too busy…” he winced. Sirius and Remus had died in that ambush, and he had felt so guilty for not having been there with them. He and his friends had only arrived at the end of the battle. Just in time to drive the Death Eaters off, but too late to save his godfather and Remus.

Ron nodded. “All of us had been losing hope. Too many had died already, with not much to show for it.”

Harry nodded. Not even Luna knew that they had found out about Harry’s scar at that time as well.

“Anyway. We were in the living room, moping, and Hermione was in the library. I thought she was just, you know, keeping herself busy to cope, but suddenly she yelled, with glee, and when we found her, she was just like that.” Ron waved his arm at the witch who had almost disappeared behind a stack of books. “So… I’ll check on Hood. I’ll be out on the sea.”

“Don’t get eaten by a Leviathan!” Luna said.

“Don’t worry. Hood would blow the thing away.” The redhead grinned, and left.

“I should head to the Ministry,” Harry said, sighing.
“Are they still infected with Nargles?”

He snorted. “More like greed and stupidity.”

Luna nodded slowly. “Nargles can be dealt with, but greed and stupidity are things not even magic can cure,” the blonde said, more seriously than usual, in Harry’s opinion.

“Are there any Leviathans near Britain?”

Luna shook her head. “No. The last one was sighted in 1861, near the Orkney Islands. It had probably lost its way, searching for whales. They harpooned it.”

Harry didn’t comment - his friend shared Hagrid’s view of animals. If she hadn’t opted to become a naturalist and expert magizoologist, she could have become a teacher at Hogwarts. Though judging by her sneer when she had told Harry and his friends of that offer, she didn’t have many good memories of the school. He cleared his throat. “I have to go as well. Dawlish will need an update, or he might do something foolish.”

Luna chuckled. “He’s like a Nargle preserve!”

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“What’s so funny?” Dawlish glared at Harry.

“I’ve just remembered something Luna said,” Harry Potter said, trying not to image a flock of tiny invisible animals nesting in the Head Auror’s hair.

“Lovegood,” the wizard muttered. “The complaints we’ve had about that rag of hers!”

And Harry’s amusement was replaced by anger. He didn’t mind, much, when people made fun of him, but if they made fun of Luna… that was too much like how her house had treated the witch at Hogwarts. He didn’t say anything though - he wasn’t here to have a row.

“Anyway,” Dawlish continued, apparently unaware of Harry’s reaction, “What is the status of your case? The acting Minister’s breathing down my neck; she wants results. And Fawley is not much better; the man’s not Minister yet, damn it!”

“We’re working on a way to kill the creature, but that kind of thing takes some time,” Harry said.

“Is that why Granger hasn’t been seen much lately?”

Harry shrugged. “She’s the expert for that kind of research.”

“That kind of research?” Dawlish asked, a hint of a smile on his face - he probably hoped to find some leverage on Harry’s friend.

“The kind of research that let us deal with Voldemort, after Dumbledore had failed.” Harry grinned when Dawlish scowled. The Ministry might not feel grateful for having been saved from Voldemort, but they certainly were careful of offending those who had defeated the Dark Lord. Even if they had to be reminded of that fact from time to time.

“So, what can I tell the Minister?”

“We’re working on it, and we’re ready to defend the Ministry until we’re ready to counter-attack. Be
ready to evacuate the Ministry though, just in case.” Harry could tell that Dawlish didn’t like hearing that.

“That’s about the same I told her yesterday,” the Head Auror said.

“Things do not change just because a Minister wants them to. Selwyn should know that, given her past.” Harry smiled.

“Have you been talking to Fawley?” Dawlish stared at him.

“Once,” Harry said. “He was interested in my opinions on politics.”

“I see.”

Harry doubted that. But ultimately, what Dawlish believed and spread didn’t matter much. Not when they were facing an invasion by a possessed battleship and her fleet.

He really hoped Hermione was making rapid progress. He had a feeling that they didn’t have as much time as back in their seventh year.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 8th, 2001

One of the first things HMS Hood had done after she had returned to service - once she had the time to spare, duty came first - had been to read up on the Bismarck’s fate. Even turned into a girl - a monster girl in the Nazi ship’s case - knowing how she had been sunk the first time should have helped in planning her second sinking. Or so Hood had thought. She had skimmed some of the other books concerning the war Hermione had gathered, but she hadn’t studied them. She had focused on the current state of the Royal Navy.

Until now.

So many ships had been sunk after her own defeat. Prince of Wales. Repulse. Barham. Ark Royal. Hermes. Eagle. Over a hundred cruisers and destroyers. But she had expected that - war was terrible.

But the number of ships scrapped after the war was over… Renown. Furious. Queen Elizabeth. Warspite. Valiant. Malaya. Revenge. Royal Sovereign. Resolution. Ramillies. Nelson. Rodney. If she had survived her name would have joined that list, Hood was certain. And even King George V and her surviving sister ships had been scrapped ten years later.

She was the only one left. The last of her generation, and the generation following her.

She sighed, closing the book. It felt like Britain had abandoned its Navy. Turned its back on those who had sacrificed so much for their country. The books said that the country had been too exhausted, too poor to keep the ships, but it still felt like a betrayal. Replacing old ships with new ones was one thing, but reducing the Royal Navy to a third-rate force…

She sighed and closed the book, with a bit more force than was necessary.

Too much, as it turned out, since Ron looked up from the book of naval tactics he had been reading. Both of them were in the living room, after they had returned from the sea.

“Are you alright?” the wizard asked.

“I’m fine,” Hood said.
He chuckled. “No, you’re not. You’re worse than Harry.”

She frowned. “What?”

“You’re not exactly subtle. Something’s eating you.”

She saw he was smiling at her, with what looked like a gentle expression. She briefly pondered deflecting the question. Mention the Bismarck. Make him think she was thinking about the next battle. She discarded that notion though - she was a battlecruiser, not some submarine. She sighed again. “I’m the last one left. All the other ships I knew are gone - sunk or scrapped.”

“Ah.” He nodded, slowly, his smile vanishing. “I know that feeling.”

“You do?”

“Harry, Hermione and I are in a similar situation. Too many of our friends died in the war, and we’ve grown distant to most of the remaining ones.”

“You and your friends keep mentioning that war.” They didn’t go into details though.

“Yes, we do.” Ron looked at her.

“Is there a book about it?” Hood knew better than to ask him, but she was still curious about how wizards fought.

He chuckled, but he didn’t sound amused. “Skeeter wanted to write a book. Hermione stopped her. She is planning to write one herself - but not yet. And no one else really knows what happened in the war.”

“Oh.”

He was looking past her, at the wall. Or at his memories. “We lost half our friends in the Battle of Hogsmeade. That was in what would have been our seventh year. We hadn’t gone back to Hogwarts - we had begun to fight before the school year had started. Mum had a fit when she found out, but there was nothing she could do - we had prepared for that for months. Harry’s godfather, Sirius, financed us. We had a safe house no one knew about, and we had tents prepared as an alternative. And we had a plan. Well, Hermione had one.

“Things went well at the start. We secured a few soul anchors. We caused quite a ruckus, but we didn’t care - we knew what we were doing, even if no one but Sirius believed us.” He snorted. “But we were starting to realise that we didn’t know where the other anchors were. That we wouldn’t find all of them in time. And then the Dark Lord returned. The Ministry was not prepared. The fools had thought he was gone for good, and didn’t do anything about his followers. The Order was not prepared either - without Dumbledore, they were pretty much a lost cause.”

Hood nodded, even though Ron wasn’t looking at her and sounded as if he didn’t even remember who he was talking to.

“And Voldemort exploited that. He sent a few of his goons to attack Hogsmeade, during a weekend when the students were visiting the village. They were going for the children. They had lists of all the muggleborns.” Ron pressed his lips together and closed his eyes. “Aurors responded, trying to stop the massacre.”

Hood was horrified. Killing children? That was what Nazis did!
“But Voldemort had wanted that. Half the Aurors responding were his followers. As was their commander. Or he was imperiused - we don’t know. He didn’t survive.” Ron scoffed. “But we know what happened: The traitors struck right when the Order and the teachers arrived to help. Struck many of them and the other Aurors in the back. We - Harry, Hermione and I - arrived just in time to see Sirius and Remus die, back to back. Harry lost it. Charged in screaming. Hermione and I followed him, of course.

“We lucked out - killed their leader right away, which threw them into disarray. The surviving teachers and Aurors rallied, and we pushed them back, through the village. If a number of the Death Eaters hadn’t been busy killing kids, they might have beaten us. As it was, we drove them out. We had won - or so we thought. And at a terrible cost.” Ron took a deep breath. “Our friends, the older Gryffindors, did what they could to save the younger ones. They were brave, but they were disorganised and not really trained. McGonagall wept when she found them where they had made a stand, in the ruins of Zonko’s. Neville had led them, or so we heard. If Ginny hadn’t been on a date with some Ravenclaw, she would have been with them - the rest of the Quidditch Team was there.”

He shook his head. “The next day, the Minister had to step down. A new one was elected. Another traitor. Voldemort had planned for that. The entire massacre had just been a ploy to get his follower elected. He easily took over the Ministry after that.”

He looked at Hood. “But we beat him in the end. And we’ll beat him again, this time. Trust me.”

Hood nodded. But she couldn’t help feeling that their victory would be a very bloody one.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 9th, 2001

Ron tossed and turned in their bed. He shouldn’t have had told Hood about Hogsmeade, he thought. It had reminded him of the war. And the other battles and losses. And of the Battle of Hogwarts.

“Here they come!”

*Ron heard Seamus yell from the top of the Astronomy Tower, and looked up just in time to see a series of Blasting Curses hit it, sending stone fragments and parts of the Tower’s wall down to the courtyard. Seamus was almost blown clear off the roof, but managed to stay on top, using his wand to send spells at the approaching broom riders. Another volley of curses struck the Tower, and Ron saw the walls starting to melt.

“Seamus! Get out!” he yelled, casting curses of his own at the broom riders circling overhead, but it was too late - the weakened walls crumbled, and the entire top third of the Tower started to topple. For an instant, Ron saw Seamus balancing on the remains of the roof, then he vanished in the cloud of dust and smoke thrown up by the first volley. A few seconds later the top of the Tower crashed into the courtyard, cutting off the screams of the half-a-dozen Hufflepuffs who had been stationed there.

Dozens of students were now casting curses into the air. One of the Death Eaters was hit and fell from his broom, but the others evaded the spells and started to climb. Until McGonagall conjured a flock of eagles trailing nets in their claws right above the enemies. Half their number was tangled in the nets before they could react, the others dodged the nets, but two of them flew right into curses cast from below. Then the eagles turned to stone, and the entangled Death Eaters were ripped off their brooms, and smashed into the ground.

“Yes!” Ron yelled. They could do this. They could win.
The gate to the courtyard was blown open, wooden shards shredding two Ravenclaws who had been too close. Through the gap screaming men and women charged, led by a wizard Ron recognised at once: Fenrir Greyback. Tonks's murderer.

Flitwick moved to face the monster, his wand dancing in his hand. Motes of light appeared all around the broken gate, flitting around for a second, then suddenly homing in on the attackers. Where they hit Shield Charms flared and shattered. Greyback was struck by a dozen, and his body seemed to fall apart at the seams, Others were left with bloody gashes and cut limbs, their angry yells turning into screams of pain as they fell to the ground. The Charms teacher flicked his wand, and debris and enemies alike shot up, higher than the walls reached, spinning wildly. Then, with a snarl worse than the sneer of a Gringotts guard, the wizard pointed his wand down, and the whole mass was driven into the ground, shattering on the cobblestones.

Flitwick smiled grimly, and took a step forward, repairing the gate. Ron took heart - they were doing better than expected. Greyback dead, and the courtyard was holding. Maybe…

“You-Know-Who!”

Panicking screams followed as the students looked up and saw Voldemort float above them, without a broom. With a sneer on his inhuman face, the wizard pointed his wand down, and spells started to hit the defenders on the ground and on the walls.

Ron and Harry took cover while Flitwick rushed to protect his charges - exposing himself in the process. The Dark Lord sent Killing Curses at him, but the diminutive teacher dodged, and his own spells flew at the Dark Lord.

That wasn’t going according to plan, Ron thought. They had to lure the Dark Lord into the Chamber of Secrets. Flitwick knew that, so why was he engaging Voldemort? “We have to do something!” Ron yelled at Harry. Hermione would be already on the way there - she had been observing the other side of the castle.

“Right!” Harry started casting curses at the Dark Lord, followed by Ron.

Their Piercing Curses were shrugged off by Voldemort’s Shield Charm as if they were hexes. Cutting Curses were even less effective. They knew other curses though. Black Curses. Ron cast a Poison Cloud while Harry’s Fleshripper was dodged, and the Dark Lord briefly vanished in the yellow cloud. When he emerged smoke was rising from his whole body, and he was mad. A rain of flaming spears descended on the courtyard, and Ron saw Justin get impaled by one. The Hufflepuff screamed as he was pinned to the ground and slowly burned. Flitwick rushed to his side, extinguishing the fire, but the gesture cost him - another spell hit him, collapsed his shield and smashed him into the outer wall with a sickening crack. Justin was hit as well, and part of his side flattened. His screams ended and he didn’t move anymore. Flitwick was dead or unconscious, and the defenders fleeing.

It was up to Harry and Ron. They each cast another curse at the Dark Lord, to get his attention, and then rushed through the next door, into Hogwarts proper, as soon as the Dark Lord turned towards them.

Ron glanced back and saw the courtyard was filled with fire. Then he saw the Dark Lord swoop through the wall of flames, coming after them. After Harry.

“He’s chasing us!” Ron yelled, running as fast as he could. “We have to hide!”

They ran up the stairs, Harry activating the armor suits lining the hallway. They were barely
moving, Ron saw, before Voldemort destroyed them. Second Floor. Myrtle’s bathroom.

Ron was panting when he entered the bathroom, his feet splashing water all around while he ran through the puddles on the floor. Harry was opening the entrance, and Ron tackled him, pushing him down the slide with himself on top.

There would be no holding action.

Behind them, curses hit the wall and ceiling. Voldemort was too close. They reached the bottom, rolling over the padded mats they had placed there, then jumped to their feet and ran to the Chamber proper. A few transfigured animals bought them enough time to turn the corner before their enemy reached the ground.

Hermione was in the middle of the Chamber, and Ron gasped when he saw their friend. The witch was bleeding from a gash on her left arm, her right eye was swollen shut, and her clothes rent. “Hermione!”

“I’m fine!” she yelled. “Get into position!”

“Trying to hide in the Chamber of Secrets, Potter? Do you think I’m such a fool as to fall for such a ruse?”

“Come and get me!” Harry yelled back.

Laughter answered him. “Do you expect me to rush into your trap?”

Ron ground his teeth and looked at Hermione. The witch was checking their map on the ground. “He’s not yet in range,” she whispered.

“I expect you to flee!” Harry yelled back.

Ron glanced at the map. The last gift from Sirius and Remus - an improved Marauder’s Map. He could see the feet representing Voldemort slowly float closer, almost touching the line.

“Hidden explosives?” Voldemort laughed. “You planned to collapse the tunnel and bury me alive? Even if that had worked you could not kill me!”

Hermione tapped a coin, then cursed when nothing happened. “He found the charges.”

Ron cursed, then glanced at his friend. Harry slipped his Cloak of Invisibility on and mounted his Firebolt.

“Harry!” Hermione yelled. “Don’t!”

But Harry was flying towards the Dark Lord already. He had to lure the monster into the Chamber, if their plan was to work. And he was the only one who had a chance of doing it.

Hermione touched the runes surrounding the crystal set in the floor in the centre with her wand, and Ron saw lights dancing over the stone, tracing the designs. It had taken them a week to prepare and mark the Chamber.

He saw spells flash in the corridor, and heard the Dark Lord yell. Harry must have hit him - or angered him. Either would work.

“Will you collapse the tunnel with Potter in it?” The Dark Lord yelled, and more spells flashed. The ground shook even. More spells hit the Chamber proper now - the Dark Lord was closing.
Then Voldemort entered the Chamber, sneering. And Hermione and Ron activated the trap. Ron slit his palm open with a Severing Charm, and let his blood drop onto the runes. Hermione did the same. And Harry probably was bleeding already. Three sacrifices. One crystal.

Voldemort started to scream. They had him.

Ron closed his eyes. They had beaten the Dark Lord once. They would beat him again. It even felt like the days before that battle - the anxious waiting for the enemy to strike while Hermione pushed herself to exhaustion trying to finish the ritual they needed for the trap.

They’d win once again. They could not afford to lose.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 9th, 2001

Hermione Granger closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. She had pretty much solved the problem. There were a few details left, but she now knew how to call shipgirls. ‘Calling’ was what she had chosen as the term for this. It wasn’t quite Summoning, since they did not exist before the ritual, but neither was it Conjuring - the ritual did not allow her to choose their form, or character. And there had to be a need for them. A need to return for their country.

Once this was over, she would have to discuss the exact category this ritual fell into with McGonagall. The old witch loved discussing Transfiguration theory, and new breakthroughs. Although she would hate that they couldn’t write this up and publish it - just as Hermione did. But this knowledge was simply too dangerous. Another Dark Lord using this was just one horrible possibility among many. If someone called up the ships of the Imperial Japanese Navy, no matter their aim, the shipgirls might go attack the United States again. She doubted the various magical enclaves and countries of North America would be able to handle such a crisis, even if they were not waging war against each other almost all the time. Hell, if the Americans knew how to call shipgirls, they’d try to use them against each other as soon as possible. Though the wizard enclaves might wipe out the native tribal nations left in the Midwest first, before turning on each other.

Hermione pressed her lips together. Even if she managed to keep this secret, the genie was out of the bottle. People had seen the Bismarck. And Hood. And if she managed to call more shipgirls - and she would! - more would be seen. The ICW was already talking about investigating the attack, and while the British delegate was doing what he could to avoid an official investigation - no country wanted that to happen to them - Hermione was certain that various spies for other countries were already in Britain.

The Bismarck wouldn’t be the end of this, she knew that. And she had an inkling of what would be needed to keep Britain safe. She sighed. It never ended.

“Hermione?”

Opening her eyes, she saw that Hood had entered the library. For a battlecruiser, the girl could move quite stealthily, at times. “Yes?”

“I was wondering…” Hood trailed off, and coughed.

“You want to know how far along I am with researching the ritual.”

Hood nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, I’ve cracked the main problem. What’s left are details.” Details that could mean the difference
between success and dangerous failure, but there was no need to tell Hood that. Hermione had created rituals before, and she knew she was one of the foremost spellcrafters in Britain. She didn’t know how she’d match up with those in the rest of Europe involved in the same kind of work - the spells she and her colleagues produced were rarely, if ever, published - but given that she had managed to find a way to stop Voldemort, she assumed she was not too terribly outclassed.

Hood smiled brightly. “Good! We need more ships! We need a real fleet!”

Hermione nodded. The battlecruiser was more right than she probably believed - though then again, Hood was used to a Royal Navy that ruled the seas.

“Which ones will you call?” Hood had walked over to her table, and was leaning on it, staring at her notes.

Hermione took a deep breath, and pulled up her historical research. “I’ve made a list of the most promising ships.” She handed a sheet over to the other girl.

“Prince of Wales, Repulse, Electra, Achates, Dorsetshire, Sikh, Cossack, …” Hood looked up. “Those are all ships who hunted the Bismarck.”

“Yes.”

“What about Victorious, Ark Royal, King George V, Rodney, Renown, Ramilies, Norfolk, Suffolk, Sheffield? They fought and sank the Bismarck.”

Hermione took a deep breath. She didn’t know how Hood would react to her next words. “They did, yes. But they survived the war, and were scrapped.” When she saw Hood frown, she quickly added: “Or, like some destroyers, they were sunk, but did not lose enough crew.”

“What?” Hood was staring at her.

“In order to call a ship back, she needs to have sunk with enough of her crew.” The results of her research had been clear: If a ship had not taken enough souls down with her, calling her back as a shipgirl was unlikely to succeed. The same went for scrapped ships. Magic needed the souls, and the hull as a focus. Although she could think of some - dark and evil - ways to compensate.

“We… I … I’m only here because so many of my crew died with me? I was called back because I failed to save my crew? I needed them to die?” Hood was trembling. “I’m a… I’m a monster…”

“No!” Hermione said, more forcefully than she had intended. She had to clear this up fast. If Hood had a breakdown… a suicidal warship with 15-inch guns was not something Hermione wanted to see, ever. “You’re not like them. You’re a spirit of a warship. A ship without a crew is just a mass of steel, without any use. A crew without a ship is just a bunch of men, useless on the sea. You were formed when both died together. The magic drew both the lingering memories of your crew, and the hull as a focus. Although she could think of some - dark and evil - ways to compensate.

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“Ah.” Hood was breathing deeply. Calming down, Hermione hoped. “So… I’m not an abomination?”

“No. You’re the embodiment of the wishes of your crew. Called back to protect Britain once more.” Probably, Hermione thought.
“And those who survived the war cannot be called back?” Hood asked, sounding rather frail right then.

“Not with this ritual,” Hermione said, shaking her head. There were other rituals she could think of, but she wouldn’t cross those lines. When Hood slowly nodded, she added: “I think we can also call back Hermes, Glorious and Courageous. And with Courageous, Acasta and Ardent. They were not involved in hunting the Bismarck, but I think they’d come back as well.” And there were more ships, of course. More cruisers and destroyers. But they’d need battleships, battlecruisers and aircraft carriers more.

Hood nodded. “Glorious and Courageous as well as her escorts certainly - they have a score to settle with the Nazis. Hermes… I don’t know. Maybe.” She suddenly smiled. “It’ll be good to have them back anyway. When do we start?”

“I’ll have to iron out the details still. Tomorrow at the earliest.” She’d have to take a Pepper-Up Potion or two… but time was running short. The news of missing fishing trawlers near Norway worried her.

*****

London, Ministry of Magic, May 9th, 2001

“Mister Potter! Or should that be ‘Auror Potter’? Nominally, you’re still a Ministry employee, aren’t you?”

Harry Potter looked at the rather agitated acting Minister for Magic and did his best not to sigh. Hyacinth Selwyn was hard to stomach on a good day, and neither of them had had a good day since the Bismarck had attacked London. “Yes, ma’am.” He ignored Dawlish wincing slightly behind the witch.

“So, as an employee, you, ultimately, answer to the Minister for Magic - me.” The witch glared at him, both her hands flat on her desk.

Harry briefly considered telling her off. The witch was a bigot, if not quite as bad as some of the other members of the Wizengamot, and he was heartily sick of dealing with those idiots. But he needed the help of the Ministry to deal with the Bismarck and her fleet, if only those brave or poor witches and wizards picketing Azkaban. So he answered: “Yes, ma’am.” He even tried not to sound too patronising.

She must have noticed his attitude anyway though, since her glare grew worse. “Now, what are you doing? John here pretty much tells me you’re working on finding the monster behind the attack on the Ministry, but it is apparent that he doesn’t know anything concrete. Tell me what is going on!”

“I’m terribly sorry, ma’am, but the case involves matters that fall under the sole purview of the Department of Mysteries. As such, I cannot reveal any information without explicit permission from the Head of the Department.”

“What? Everyone knows that Granger is holed up in your house, working with you! I want to know what is going on! The ICW is breathing down my neck, the Wizengamot is in an uproar, and you are trying to keep me in the dark about this whole affair!”

Harry was envious that Ron was with Hood today, and sighed. “As I said, I cannot disclose such information, ma’am. We are working hard on eliminating this threat, once and for all. We have repulsed another attack before it came close to London, but we’re anticipating a third attempt.”
“I already heard that from John here! I want to know what you are doing, not some platitudes! Stop trying to confound me with empty words! And don’t try to deflect this on Granger! She’s not here!”

“Revealing crucial information such as what you are asking for would endanger the whole operation.” Harry wanted to hex the stupid witch, but controlled himself. He noticed Dawlish growing tense. Apparently, Harry still hadn’t developed what Hermione called a ‘poker face’.

“What? Are you insinuating that I cannot be trusted?”

Harry didn’t think the witch would appreciate his honest opinion of her. “You said that you are under pressure from the ICW and the Wizengamot. Neither can be trusted with this information.”

“I can be trusted with it! I’m the acting Minister for Magic!”

“Ministers have been compromised or magically controlled in the past. Unless you can resist an Imperius Curse and have mastered Occlumency, you cannot be trusted with such vital information.”

“That is ridiculous! No one is immune to the Imperius Curse!” Selwyn was almost frothing at the mouth. Dawlish was keeping quiet.

Harry simply smiled.

“What? Are you claiming… that is…” She was gaping at him.

“I threw off the Imperius in my fourth year, ma’am,” Harry said. “Not even Voldemort managed to control me.” Both Selwyn and Dawlish shuddered. He sighed. “Ma’am, we’re doing what we can to deal with this. We learned in the last war that we cannot trust anyone with crucial information. Just tell whoever is pressuring you that we’re working on it, and that we’ll not react kindly to any attempt to hinder us.” Harry leaned forward and spoke more quietly. “Just let us do what we need to. And maybe remind everyone trying to meddle in this exactly who defeated Voldemort.” He smiled. “And tell them that you can’t tell them anything else for security reasons.”

Selwyn closed her mouth, and slowly nodded. She understood then. Dawlish even grinned - the man was a better politician than an Auror, in Harry’s opinion.

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On the way home, Harry stopped in a pub to watch the news. The owner knew him and his friends, and turned the volume up a bit as soon as he spotted him, then served him a soda without asking.

Harry’s good mood disappeared as soon as he saw the report from a devastated Norwegian village, though. The houses in ruins, hundreds dead or missing. He cursed under his breath. It was possible that the Bismarck was simply testing her weapons, or venting on defenceless muggles. But it was more likely, Harry thought, remembering Hermione’s explanations, that the Bismarck needed sacrifices.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 9th, 2001

Harry Potter was not surprised when he told Hermione about the missing Norwegians and she simply nodded. “You expected this, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Hermione sighed, and tapped her pen on her notepad. “Or rather, it was an educated guess. If the Bismarck is limited by the same mechanics we are, then she’ll need sacrifices for some of her
“I guess we should be glad then that the Royal Navy had some disastrous battles with huge loss of life,” Harry said.

“Oh, yes. There might be some alternatives that would not require actual sacrifices, but they all depend on large numbers of people dying.”

Harry didn’t ask if she planned to research those alternatives - he knew she would. Just in case. That kind of preparation had saved their lives more than once during the war. “Alright. I’ll leave you to it.”

“I’m working as fast as I can,” Hermione said.

“I know.” He smiled when he left.

Luna was outside Hermione’s Lair, peering at an empty portrait frame. Harry had never seen a painting inside, just an empty canvas, but Luna was convinced that someone visited while every resident was asleep, and kept trying to catch the elusive visitor. She turned towards him as soon as he had closed the door, though, so she had been waiting for him.

“Harry! You’re doing it again!”

“What?”

“You know what I mean.”

He thought he did. But it wasn’t something he wanted to talk about. Not even with Luna. It didn’t look like he’d get his wish - the blonde witch pouted and walked right in front of him, her hands on her hips.

“You’re excluding everyone again. Like in the war. You, Ron and Hermione. You don’t trust anyone else.”

“We trust you,” Harry said. Luna had proven that she could be trusted. She had never doubted or betrayed them.

“Well, I don’t count. Ask Rita.” Luna grinned, very briefly. “But you don’t trust anyone else. Not the Ministry, not the Weasleys, not McGonagall.” She shook her head. “You can’t win every fight alone.”

“We’re not alone. We have Hood, and we are in contact with the Ministry and the Prime Minister.”

“None of them know anything about what you are doing. Not even Hood knows much.” Luna glared at him. “I asked.”

“Operational security.” Harry frowned. Luna should know better. The more people knew, the greater the risk of betrayal was.

“Ginny didn’t betray you.” Luna frowned back at him.

“I know she didn’t. But if we hadn’t told her, Snape wouldn’t have been able to read her mind and find out,” Harry spat out.

He remembered it as if it had happened last night.
They had prepared for that mission for months. Hermione had devoured all the books on wards and Curse-Breaking. Harry’s friend had pestered Bill for some tutoring so much, Fleur had thought the witch was after her fiancé, which had resulted in a rather memorable scene at the Burrow. Harry and Ron had trained equally hard with Sirius. Defense, duelling, curses and counter-curses. And they had picked Dobby’s brain about Malfoy Manor until the poor elf had had trouble finding his way around Hogwarts. And on the night of the new moon, they had finally acted.

“How much longer?” Ron whispered, face hidden behind a muggle-style ski mask, glancing nervously around the bush they were hiding in.

“Don’t rush me! Manipulating the wards so we can pass through them without alerting the owner is difficult!” Hermione whispered back while she continued to weave a complicated pattern with her wand.

Harry touched the small bottle hanging from a cord around his neck. All of them wore the same. It contained Malfoy’s blood, and unless Hermione had made a mistake when she created those necklaces, it would allow them to pass through the wards - once Hermione had finished adjusting them.

Only two others knew of their plans. Sirius, who had trained them, and Ginny. Harry’s godfather had really wanted to come with them, but his exoneration was still shaky, and being discovered breaking into Malfoy Manor would have meant he would go back to Azkaban. And that would kill him, Harry knew. Fortunately, he had accepted that they’d need him to bail them out, should something happen. Ron’s sister had spied on them, and had thought they wanted Malfoy’s blood for a dark ritual. She hadn’t been repulsed that much by the idea, Harry had noticed, but they had told her the truth anyway.

“And done!” Hermione whispered, smiling widely. “The Death Eater’s lair is open to us!”

The three had crept out of the bush, and through the wardline. None of them were using magic to hide - just in case there were spells checking for magic. Hermione hadn’t been able to exclude that possibility.

It didn’t matter - in their mottled dark clothes, and without the light of the moon, no one spotted them as they made their way to a side door of the manor Dobby had told them was used by the elves to enter the spice garden. Ron made short work of the door’s lock - he had learned that from the twins - and the three were inside. Harry had the map memorised, and they quickly passed the kitchen, empty at this time of the night, and the music salon, until they reached Lucius’s office.

That was warded as well, and Draco’s blood wouldn’t help there. But there were more ways around such defences than breaking the wards. Hermione cast a Silencing Charm on the door, and Harry and Ron blew it apart, wards and all, with Reductor Curses.

Lucius was sitting behind his desk, gaping at them. He grabbed his wand, but he was too slow. Harry’s Disarming Charm slammed into him and smashed the Death Eater and his seat into the wall behind him. Harry caught the wand while Ron bound and silenced the dazed man. Hermione repaired the broken door. All in less than twenty seconds. As they had trained.

They didn’t lift the Silencing Charm until the man had been fed three drops of Veritaserum. Then the interrogation started. And the disappointment.

Lucius knew that the Dark Lord had not died for good, but didn’t know how this was possible. He suspected some sort of ritual, like last time, and wondered who would be the chosen helper. All the same, the wizard had already been preparing for his master’s return. Stockpiling potions and other
supplies. Strengthening his influence in the Wizengamot. And blooding promising recruits by murdering muggles. Hermione made the mistake of ordering the man to list all his crimes, and he complied. So many deaths...

When Lucius told them about the murder of the Prewett twins, Ron almost killed him. When he told them about the plan to frame Hermione for the murder of a muggleborn, a plan he only abandoned because Dumbledore killed Voldemort, she almost killed him. In the end, after the man had spilled all his relevant secrets and crimes, Harry killed him with a Piercing Curse to the head. None of them had ever considered letting the man live. Not after his confessions.

Even so, the mission was only a partial success. They had not found out where the Horcruxes were - other than by inferring from how Lucius was granted the diary - but they knew the Death Eaters were getting ready for Voldemort’s return - and how. And the loss of Lucius would hurt those preparations.

They were just about to leave the manor when Sirius warned them. Aurors were about to enter - they were already talking to a house elf. Someone must have betrayed them! And the only other one to have known about this was Ginny.

The three rushed out, barely managing to avoid the house elf before the creature found the corpse of his master. They disillusioned themselves, this time - Aurors would be watching all corners - and ran to the ballroom. Hermione swept her wand, and all the doors and windows opened. They heard cries of alarm from outside, but not even the best Aurors could watch the entire front of the wing that had been opened now. Harry mounted his Firebolt, Hermione straddling it behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist, Ron mounted his broom, and they were off, directly into the dark sky of the new moon.

A minute later, they apparated to the Shrieking Shack, where they hastily changed clothes and then rushed back to Hogwarts. Harry checked the map before the left the secret passage, and they had another nasty surprise: Aurors were inside the school. Shacklebolt was even walking with McGonagall past the statue the three were hiding inside - if they had not stopped, they would have been caught.

“And I’m telling you, Minerva, it is possible. Potter and his friends have been acting very oddly ever since Dumbledore died. You know what they said about the Imperiused Death Eaters. I’d not put it past them to attack the Malfoys to avenge the Headmaster.”

“Kingsley! Attacking, yes. But murdering? In cold blood? I refuse to believe that. Severus must be mistaken, or they told tall tales to Miss Weasley. They have to be in bed already. Maybe…”

“A tryst?” Shacklebolt’s voice was full of doubt. “The three of them together?”

“Miss Granger is too proper for that!”

The voices faded.

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione. “If we can’t make it back to the dorm in time, we can use that as an alibi.”

Ron gaped and Hermione gasped.

“It’s better than a murder charge,” Harry said.

Hermione had bitten her lower lip, then nodded. “I know an abandoned classroom which has been used for that, according to the other prefects. We can set things up…”
Harry smiled. While it hadn’t been true, then, it had made them aware of the possibility. And seeing how everyone had reacted to that - especially Ginny - had triggered some defiant reactions as well. When they had made it real, a year later, they...

“You’ve been lost in the past again, Harry!” Luna interrupted him. “You’re too young for that!”

“I don’t feel young,” Harry said. He patted the blonde’s head. “Let’s get something to eat, alright?”

She sighed, but nodded.

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Orkney Island, Scapa Flow, May 10th, 2001

HMS Hood stood on the beach, her feet in the surf, gazing out at the sea. Behind her, Harry, Hermione and Ron were drawing circles and runes onto the stone floor they had turned part of the sand into. They were working magic, preparing the ritual. Hood couldn’t help them with that. Apart from Hermione, no one understood the ritual, even Harry and Ron were just following her quite audible orders. Hood grinned - she wasn’t the only one the witch bossed around. She just hoped they would hurry, and start. She knew the enemy was out there, preparing to strike. They had a fleet now, judging by the missing Norwegians. Human sacrifices… back when she had been a ship, that had been nothing more than a sailor’s tale. Not a horrible fact.

Another wave lapped at her boots. She almost rode it back out to the sea. She was a ship, not a girl. A battlecruiser. She needed the sea. Needed to sail. And she needed her fleet. Escorts to screen her. Cruisers to support her. Battleships and battlecruisers to cover her. And she needed friends. Family. She was no witch, nor normal human. She was unique. And she didn’t want to be. Not when it meant she’d be alone.

She knelt down and cupped a handful of salt water in her palm, sniffing it. It smelled the same as before. No taint. No blood. Not like in her nightmares. This had been her home port, during the war. And Britain was at war again.

“We’re ready!” Hermione said, excitement colouring her tone.

Hood turned around. The witch was standing in a circle, wand in hand. She wasn’t wearing her robe though, Hood noticed.

“Let’s get started then,” the battlecruiser said. “All I have to do is wish for my friends and comrades?”

Hermione nodded. Harry, Ron and Luna, who hadn’t been ordered to help preparing, apparently, stood in the circle as well, forming a triangle with Hermione in the centre. “And sing!” Luna added.

Hood closed her eyes when Hermione started chanting. The words sounded alien to her, not quite Latin. But the urgent need, the desperation they conveyed, the determination - Hood was familiar with that. Over 1400 times.

She thought of Prince of Wales, who had been at Hood’s side when she died, unable to help. And who had been sunk herself, with Repulse. Glorious, shelled to death by German ships because her ignorant captain made a fatal mistake. Their escorts, sharing her fate. Were they not burning with the desire to return, to finish what they had started? To make up for their failures, as Hood was? To be part of the Royal Navy again? To do their duty again? To be together again?
Hood remembered their sorties. Their exercises. Their battles, scant as they had been. And of course, the hunt for the Bismarck. The most important fight of her own life. The reason she had returned.

Behind her, the chanting stopped. She felt a tingle surround her. Magic. Then the three started to sing. There was but one song for this occasion, and Hood readily joined in.

“Rule, Britannia! Rule the waves…”

*****

When the song ended, Hood saw the air shimmer, further out. The water seemed to froth, to foam. Then a figure, no, more than one, started to rise out of the sea. Water flew down their bodies, down their rigging, as they rose. The sun glinted on the barrels of their guns as they started to move, confused at first, then falling into familiar formations. The leaner figures, destroyers, fanning out in their smaller riggings. And the capital ships forming a line in the centre, massive 15-inchers seeking targets.

Hood barely took notice of the witch collapsing behind her - she was out in the surf, her rigging appearing as soon as she had enough water under her keel, and her boilers heated, rushing towards the fleet that arrived.

The escorts parted before her, their eyes widening when they recognised her. But Hood only had eyes for the girl in the centre. A shade smaller than herself, but with the slightly more muscular figure of a King George V-class battleship. HMS Prince of Wales.

“Hood… but how…” the girl asked. “Where are we? We heard the call… but we sunk… what happened?”

Hood grinned. “We’re needed again. Britain expects us to do our duty. For Queen and country!”


The Royal Navy was back. Her navy.

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To Battle!

Chapter 7: To Battle!

Norway, Sandnessund Strait, May 10th, 2001

Bismarck stared at the place where her sister ship had sunk. Unlike herself, her sister had died in shallow water. Instead of going out fighting, like Scharnhorst and herself, she had been killed after spending years hiding in a narrow fjord, a mere distraction for the Royal Navy, until bombers had finally killed her. She hadn’t even been able to rest in peace; her wreck had been cut up, plundered, pieces and parts carried off. It was an ignoble end for one of the mightiest battleships of the Kriegsmarine.

But she would return and take revenge. Bismarck would see to it. She took a deep breath. They had taken her sister apart, broken her up, but even without a wreck as a focus, her spirit lingered. As did the souls of the 1204 men who had died with her. She reached out and touched the fragments and shades, feeling their pain. Their hatred. Their desire for vengeance. Feeling and fueling.

She looked over her shoulder, at her escorts. Erich Giese, Wilhelm Heidkamp, Anton Schmitt, Friedrich Eckoldt and Z26 straightened. Each of them was towing a raft or lifeboat, or a fishing boat, filled with Norwegians they had taken from the village they had raided. They were dazed from spending hours inside the storm that hid them from the eyes of the muggles. Weakened and dying.

She scoffed. She had planned to use those sacrifices to raise her sister. But they wouldn’t do. Her sister deserved more than to return as a shadow of herself. Bismarck needed more. More muggles dying. More death to fuel the ritual. To give the lingering spirit a form fitting her.

At her command, a dozen 2 cm FlaK 30 turned and aimed at the raft behind Erich Giese. A second later they started firing. Hundreds of shells tore the raft and its occupants to pieces. A few muggles escaped immediate death, jumping or falling into the water. It didn’t save them - her guns tracked them, and killed them.

Bismarck closed her eyes, ignoring the screams of the muggles in the other boats and rafts. She had felt those deaths. She shivered. She could use those deaths. It was not as efficient, compared to a proper sacrifice. Much had been wasted. But enough power remained. She looked at her escorts, at Blücher and Scharnhorst. They were staring at her, confused. She smiled.

“Kill the muggles!”

Their eyes widened, for a fraction of a second, before they jumped to obey, eagerly even. The muggles’ screams were cut off as dozens of FlaKs opened up on them, snuffing their pitiful lives out, shooting their corpses until the sea was stained red. And she felt their deaths. Drew power from them.

It wasn’t enough to grant her sister the form she deserved. But, Bismarck thought, her smile widening as she let the storm fade, revealing the lights of Tromso, there were more than enough muggles right there. In range of all her and her fleet’s guns.

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Tromso was burning. Bismarck’s fleet had wrecked the bridges and causeways of the island first, cutting off escape routes. Then they had started to shell the city. The destroyers had sailed closer, like
sharks, all of their guns firing as fast as possible, wrecking houses and streets. Blücher, Scharnhorst and herself had stayed back - the island was so close, and so small, even their secondary armament could cover all of it easily. They had kept firing, even when muggle planes had arrived - Bismarck had nothing to fear from muggle aeroplanes. Once their anti-aircraft guns had shot down one of those ‘jets’, the others had retreated. A few wizards had arrived on brooms, but had fled as quickly as they had come. Cowards, all of them.

Hundreds, thousands of muggles had died. Bismarck had felt their lives end, had gathered the power their deaths netted her, each trickle adding up. She felt as if she was bursting at the seams. So much power! Enough to summon her sister! Enough to summon even more of her comrades!

She started the ritual, felt and saw the water starting to churn. The tall, muscular form of her sister rose from the sea, pale limbs twitching as she sailed again, after decades. Red eyes met hers, blinking in wonderment. Tirpitz was back. Her sister slowly started to smile.

But Bismarck was not yet done. She closed her eyes, and reached out. She had enough power. More than enough. She didn’t need to be at the site of their sinking to call a ship back. Hissing, she focused. Another, slightly shorter form started to rise from the water. Gneisenau. Wrecked and sunk by German soldiers in Gotenhafen to close the port, she was restored now, her guns which had been stripped returned. A leaner figure followed, an eager grin on her pale face. Admiral Hipper. Blücher’s sister ship. Scuttled in the last days of the war, raised and broken up, she too had now the chance to take revenge.

Bismarck faced the new arrivals with a smile, hiding how exhausted she was. She had done what she could to restore the ships, poured all the power the massacre of Tromso had granted her into them. They were not as whole as Bismarck herself, or Scharnhorst. Not even all those deaths could make up for what was missing. But they would be more than able to visit upon London and the Ministry of Magic what they had done to Tromso. And this time, Hood would be the one to be hounded by a fleet, hunted down like an animal, and reduced to a wreck in an uneven battle.

She would have her revenge! On all of those who had vexed her!

*****

Orkney Island, Scapa Flow, May 10th, 2001

Ron Weasley knelt next to the collapsed Hermione. A quick Diagnostic Charm - one she had insisted he learn, a more sophisticated one than the one in the Aurors requirements - told him that she was fine, just exhausted. He sighed with relief and shook his head. “Stupid witch overdid it again.”

Harry healed the cut on her hand with a flick of his wand and snorted. “She’s always been an overachiever.”

Both chuckled. Their love was fine. Ron cast a Cushioning Charm and they laid her down on it, Harry brushing some of the hair that had escaped her ponytail from her face. Neither mentioned that they were feeling a bit lightheaded themselves - the ritual had been exhausting.

“Wow… look at all the water dancers!”

Luna’s exclamation drew Ron’s attention to the sea. He blinked, then grabbed his Omnioculars. “Merlin’s Balls!”

“What?” Harry asked.

“She summoned a dozen shipgirls!” Ron said. “No, more than a dozen. Fourteen.”
“It’s like an Ice Maiden ballet, only on the surface.”

Ron didn’t share Luna’s cheerful opinion. The girls gliding over the water did look impressive though. Two of them were as tall and lean as Hood, and similarly dressed - armored boots and gauntlets, skimpy skirt and shirt. One of them had a more substantial belt though. And a more substantial bust. Battleships or battlecruisers - their rigging gave them away. Three more girls wore shields on their left arm. Tall, slim ones. Flight decks, he realised. Their boots and gauntlets were not armored, and their rigging lacked the bigger guns. One of them straightened her arm, the shield - the flight deck - leveling, and he saw a tiny aeroplane take off from it - and suddenly grow in size. It was a biplane, and it flew towards Ron and his friends.

“Hey!” Luna was waving, and jumping up and down.

The plane waved with its wings as it flew over their heads. Ron didn’t see a pilot. “I hope the muggles don’t panic,” he whispered - small planes had caused panic in some areas, after London. Then he studied the shipgirls again. There was an average-sized girl, athletic but not too lean, standing near Hood. The smaller girls - about 5 foot, he guessed - were all quite athletic. Not quite a Seeker’s build, but close. He counted eight, sailing circles around the others. Those would be the escorts. The destroyers. Hood had been clear on the need for escorts.

“It’ll take us a few trips to get them all to London,” Ron said.

“The house will be full!” Luna beamed at him. “It’ll be almost like being back at Hogwarts, but better! They seem to be very friendly!”

They better be friendly, Ron thought. If they were hostile, then Britain was doomed.

“How many did we summon?”

Ron glanced back. Hermione was standing, but still supported by Harry. He wanted to tell her to sit down and rest, but he knew she wouldn’t listen. And they needed to get the girls down to London. And get ready. “Fourteen. Two battleships or battlecruisers. Three aircraft carriers. One cruiser I think, and eight destroyers.”

“As planned then.” Hermione smiled. “I hope it’ll be enough.”

So did Ron.

*****

London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 10th, 2001

Luna hadn’t been correct. This was worse than Hogwarts. Hogwarts at least had a kitchen staff able to feed hundreds of students. Grimmauld Place had Harry to cook, and Ron to cast the Doubling Charm until his arm felt as if it was about to fall off. Those girls could eat! Each of them seemed to eat as much as Hood did. At least they were now full, and Ron could massage some life back into his wand arm.

But apart from food, the girls needed rooms as well - quarters. Dobby would have been in heaven. The elf had taken over the house after Kreacher had been killed for his betrayal - by Hermione, even - and had thrived for the few months until he died in the Battle of Hogwarts. Without Dobby, Harry and Ron had to do all of the work - Hermione was off in her lair, preparing the ritual to seal Voldemort’s soul, so it was ready when needed, and Luna…”

Ron blinked. Where was Luna? He hadn’t seen her since they had arrived, and the destroyers had
started to scout out the house, causing a ruckus - that weird girl who looked like she had nicked half of a Durmstrang robe, Cossack, had almost broken the pantry door.

He found Luna in the living room, flipping through the photo albums. Those covering their younger years. Those Harry had made for Sirius’ first Christmas as a free man. She must have heard him entering since she looked up and smiled. “I need to thank you for letting me help you with the ritual.”

“We’re grateful for your help,” Ron said.

“Yes, you are. Which is a very good thing.”

That sounded… if that had been a Slytherin, he’d call it arrogant, but for her honest voice. “Err…”

“A year ago, you’d not have let me help. Nor anyone else.” Her smile widened, but she sounded sad.

“Ah.” Ron had to admit that Luna might be correct. “Well, things changed. We have a homicidal sea monster attacking us.”

“Things may have changed, but more importantly, you’ve changed. You all.” Luna sighed.

“We have?”

The blonde witch slowly nodded, her voice turning serious - or as serious as Luna could be. “You’re no longer three people who are lonely together.”

Ron frowned. “We were not lonely. We had each other.”

She kept looking at him, cocking her head sideways a bit. “And that was all you had.”

And that had been enough, for years. Each other. Ron remembered the day - the evening - things had changed. A week after they killed Nott, only to find out that Voldemort had another body already. A week, holed up in Grimmauld Place, utterly alone, despairing. Harry hadn’t spoken more than a few words in days, hadn’t left his room at all. Hermione had buried herself in books, had slept in the library several nights - if napping with her head on a desk could be called sleeping. And Ron himself, he had been, well, angry at everyone, but mostly at himself for not having been quick enough to... whatever he might have done. And for not being able to save his two best friends from themselves. He had tried to talk to Harry, without success. He hadn’t known what to say.

And he had tried to talk to Hermione, with the same result. She had ignored him, not even looking at him while she researched. He doubted she was even aware of what she was researching, as long as it kept her busy. She had been so out of it, she hadn’t used her wand to summon a book, but had climbed on a chair to get it, and slipped.

He had caught her in his arms, and for a moment, both of them had seemed frozen. Then she had sagged, laid her head on his chest, and cried. For hours, or so it felt. At some point he had sat down, on the floor, with her in his lap. He had held her, and cried as well. She had started talking, between sobs, about her nightmares. About her guilt. About her failures - imagined or real, he couldn’t tell. He had talked about his own nightmares, until she had fallen asleep in his arms, in his lap. He had let her sleep, even though his legs had started to grow numb. She had needed the rest.

He had fallen asleep as well, and had slept until he had been woken up, not by a nightmare, but by Hermione. Who had been, if not completely, mostly back to normal. Taking charge. She hadn’t had a nightmare, for the first time in a week. And had dragged him off, to sleep with Harry, so their friend could get some comfort as well. And she hadn’t taken no for an answer, blasting Harry’s door when he had refused to open it.
They had slept together, in the same bed, all three, then. Just slept. They didn’t go further that day, no matter what others thought. That part of their relationship happened later. But none of them had ever slept alone since that day.

“You’ve been lost in the past! Like Harry!” Luna pouted at him.

He smiled. “I’ve just remembered how we became, well, us.”

“Oh.” Her eyes grew wide. Then clapped her hands. “I’ve always wanted to know how that happened! Who did kiss whom first? Were you all together from the start, or did two of you form a couple, and the third joined in later? Or did Hermione make a schedule for her time with you and Harry?”

Maybe, Ron thought, being more open wasn’t an altogether good thing…

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 10th, 2001

Dinner at Grimmauld Place was far more hectic and packed than any other meal Hermione Granger remembered - and that included the summer in 1995, when the Weasleys and several Order members regularly filled Sirius’s kitchen.

She had had to defend her usual seat by threatening to cut anyone encroaching on it off from Harry’s food, or she’d have been shoved to the side by the horde of ravenous destroyers. They looked like athletic teenagers, fifth to sixth years, but they were far stronger than even Hagrid - and hungrier than Norberta. Harry and Ron were casting Doubling Charms constantly, again, and whatever appeared on the table was grabbed and devoured. Luna seemed to love it - she was grabbing sandwiches and trying to feed them to the destroyers.

Hermione looked at Hood, who was leaning against the corner, plate in hand, then pointedly at the carnage. She knew they had better manners than that.

The battlecruiser shrugged. “We’re in a state of alert - replenishment has to be done as quickly as possible so we’re always ready to sortie.”

“The pickets at Azkaban haven’t noted anything unusual. I think the Bismarck’s still near Norway,” Harry said, taking a small breather before continuing his casting.

Hermione briefly pondered how to expedite the whole process. If she enchanted the table, or the oven, maybe, to multiply food placed on or in it… No, it would be better to enchant a plate so any food that was taken off it was replaced, with another plate for the original food. She sighed. She had spent the afternoon preparing the sealing ritual they had used on Voldemort, and she was too tired to do such frivolous work… then again, seeing the appetite of the shipgirls, it wasn’t exactly frivolous. They would need quite the number of skilled wizards and witches to keep them supplied.

Looking up, she suddenly noticed an owl outside the window. The animal was tapping its beak against the glass, but the noise was lost in the cacophony caused by the new arrivals discussing their duties - and the food. It was Arthur’s owl. With a flick of her wand she opened the window, and the disgruntled-looking animal dropped a scroll on her table while knocking over a pitcher of lemonade.

Nothing a quick Cleaning Charm couldn’t fix. Hermione cast one while she opened the scroll. As soon as she started to read, she felt like she had been kicked in the stomach.

“What’s wrong, Hermione?” Harry asked.
She shook her head as the room gradually fell silent. “Dear Lord… it’s from Arthur, and the Prime Minister. There has been an attack on a Norwegian town, Tromso.” She took a deep breath. “It was shelled for an hour in the early morning. The death toll is estimated to be in the thousands - they’ve recovered over two thousand bodies so far, and are far from done. Twice that number of wounded, at least.”

“The Bismarck did it?” Hood asked.

“Not just the Bismarck. The Scandinavian Ministry had wizards on site. They reported several creatures walking on water - at least ten.”

That sent a mix of hisses and muttered curses through the assembled shipgirls. Hermione understood their reaction. Taking on The Bismarck with her two remaining escorts was one thing, but ten of those monsters?

“Couldn’t they stop them?” Prince of Wales asked.

Hermione read further, shaking her head. “No. The Norwegian military lost one fighter, though they’re not certain if the F-16 was shot down, or crashed because the pilot made a mistake while flying low. The Scandinavian wizards lost two of their broom riders.”

She looked at her friends. That could have been them. Judging by their expressions, they were aware of that.

“Why did they attack that town?” Ron asked. “Was there anything related to Bismarck or Voldemort?”

“The Bismarck’s sister ship, Tirpitz, was sunk there,” Hermione said. “She was salvaged after the war.” She closed her eyes for an instant. “That’s why they attacked the town. They needed more deaths to raise her, without a hull left.” A lot more deaths. She shivered at the thought.

“They massacred a town for that?” Harry spat out. He looked livid.

“They didn’t manage that,” Hermione said. “Tromso has, had a population of about seventy thousand.” It could have been far, far worse.

“They’ll be coming for us now,” Hood said. “We need to get recon flights up to cover the coast. In case they’ll attack somewhere other than here.”

“They won’t,” Harry said. “Voldemort tried to kill me several times after I managed to survive his first attempt. He’ll come for the Ministry again.”

Glorious stood up. “I’ll go and launch a patrol!” She as well as Acasta and Ardent were halfway to the door before Hood managed to stop them. Hermione winced - the carrier had launched her planes right after she had arrived at Scapa Flow, and she had wanted to keep the patrols going even over London. Only the fact that the sound of her planes over London would cause a city-wide panic had persuaded her to go without a patrol in the air while she was in London. She was obviously determined not to repeat her captain’s mistake that had resulted in her being sunk by Scharnhorst and Gneisenau.

“Alright, we’ll apparate you to the Thames Estuary. You can start launching your aeroplanes,” Ron offered.

Ron grabbed Glorious’s hand, Harry took the two destroyers, and they apparated away.
“We’ll need to deploy Hermes and Courageous as well, to cover more of the coast,” Hood said. “We can’t afford to miss the enemy’s approach.”

The two carriers nodded with grim expressions.

“We’ll need to inform the Prime Minister as well, so they won’t be mistaken for the enemy,” Hermione added. She ignored the scowling that remark caused - the new shipgirls didn’t know yet how much their country had changed.

And it looked like they’d have to fight before they did.

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“We’re facing the biggest threat to the Statute of Secrecy since it was instituted! The Scandinavian Ministry is blaming us for it! The ICW is starting an investigation! What are you doing?”

Acting Minister Selwyn was screaming. Harry Potter had never seen ‘Horrible Hyacinth’ like that - she had completely lost her composure. If they were not in her office, safe from eavesdroppers, she’d be out of her office by noon. And yet he had to tread carefully here, or her panicked actions would make defeating the possessed Bismarck even harder than it already was. He spoke as calmly as he could: “The Statute of Secrecy is not actually in that much danger, Madam. I spoke with the Prime Minister last night and measures have been taken to hide the involvement of magic.”

“The muggles have pictures of the attack! Of those monsters! I’ve seen them!” Selwyn waved some muggle newspapers around.

“Those are the muggle versions of The Quibbler, Madam,” Harry said. “Those are not serious newspapers.” He felt guilty about maligning Luna’s magazine, but it wasn’t as if the Ministry took The Quibbler seriously anyway.

“Are you certain?” The witch looked at the newspapers with an expression of distaste.

“Yes. The muggle governments of Norway and Britain have already taken steps to discredit those pictures.” And the video recordings. “Though even without those measures the muggles do not suspect magic.” At least not the majority. He pointed at a blurred picture of a shipgirl firing her guns. A German destroyer, unless Hood was mistaken. “Do you see that? That doesn’t look like magic. That looks like muggle technology.” Of course the experts would know that something didn’t add up - the attackers appeared out of nowhere, and used weapons which had been decommissioned and destroyed decades ago. But even among those who came to the correct conclusion there wouldn’t be many, if any, who’d risk both criminal prosecution and the scorn and ridicule of the public and their peers and actually claim that this was done by magic. But that was too complicated for Selwyn in her current state. “You can assure the ICW that the Statute of Secrecy is safe.”

“Until they attack the next muggle town,” Dawlish cut in. “Why exactly did they attack that town? There was nothing special about it.”

Harry took a deep breath. “We believe it was a test. A test for their new recruits.”

Both the Minister and the Head Auror gasped. “What?” Dawlish stared at him. “They recruited more monsters?”

“Yes.”
“And… that’s why you asked me to double the pickets! You think they will attack Britain?” Dawlish shook his head.

“Yes.” Harry nodded. “But we are prepared for them.”

“We are?” Selwyn blinked. “Why wasn’t I informed of this?”

“Security precautions, Madam Minister,” Dawlish said smoothly - the man had recovered quickly. “And plausible deniability.”

“Don’t feed me that line, John! What did you do?” The acting Minister was waving her wand around, even more agitated.

“We’ve made allies,” Harry said, “who fought and beat those monsters before.” That was the story he and his friends had come up with, to hide the fact that they had summoned the shipgirls. “They’ve sent a force to defeat them.”

“What allies?” Selwyn looked like she was about to have a stroke. Her wand twitched, and Harry tensed up. He wasn’t about to let her - or anyone - cast at him. Dawlish was listening openly and, Harry thought, eagerly.

He would disappoint them though. “Allies who value their privacy,” he said.

“I want to meet them!”

“They do not want to meet you,” Harry said. Which was a good thing - Harry didn’t think Selwyn’s attitude would go over well with the Royal Navy shipgirls.

“What did you tell them Potter?” Selwyn trembled. “What lies did you spread?”

They had told Hood some stories about the last war in the time since the battlecruiser had started living with them. Predictably, she hadn’t had any desire to talk to the current Ministry. But Harry couldn’t say that to the Minister. “Madam, they only revealed themselves due to the attack on London. They do not want to have any contact with the Ministry.”

“They’re in contact with you!” The witch sneered.

“Yes.” Harry inclined his head. Like Dumbledore used to, when faced with a recalcitrant student. Like Harry had been, at times.

The acting Minister stared at him. “What’s your plan, Potter?” she whispered.

“We want to defend Britain from those monsters.” Harry was certain that Hermione was already making more plans, for the time after Voldemort’s next defeat - she did not think the shipgirls would fade with the threat gone - but for now, they were concentrating on dealing with the Kriegsmarine.

“So go and deal with them!” Selwyn sank into her seat, glaring at him.

She was probably already realising that things were changing, Harry thought. As, a glance confirmed, was Dawlish.

“I’ll need to talk to Dawlish about coordinating with our pickets.”

“Do so! Just go!”

The two wizards left the Minister’s office. Dawlish shook his head once the door had closed behind
they. “Are you planning to run for Minister?” he asked.

Harry shook his head. “No. None of us have any interest in that.” The paperwork alone would be murder, and dealing with people like Selwyn all day… that would lead to actual murder. Hermione could barely stand her meetings, and she was ignoring most politics, office and regular. “But,” Harry continued, “we might have some concerns, from time to time.”

Dawlish snorted. “Traditionally, that’s done with bribes. But I guess you don’t need bribes, huh?”

Harry chuckled. “Now, I need to talk with the one in charge of the pickets - all of them. We might need their help.”

“They’re not good in a fight. I can ask for volunteers, veterans, instead,” Dawlish said. “There are a number who’d jump at the chance to fight at your side.”

And among them would be friends of Dawlish, and a few others, likely. Harry knew that. But he also knew just how dangerous the upcoming battle would be. They’d need that help.

Especially if they had to take Azkaban for the ritual to seal the soul fragment.

“Alright. Gather them, and have them ready at noon. But they’ll have to be good flyers.”

*****

The dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards who were assembled when Harry arrived at the Ministry were a mixed group of rookies and veterans. Too few veterans, sadly. Harry nodded at Elias Brown, a grey-haired Auror who had survived the ambush at Hogsmeade, and at Bess Elwes, who had been cursed at Hogwarts. He didn’t recognise the others. Ron probably would have - his friend had paid more attention to the rookies.

He cleared his throat. “Alright. You all volunteered for this. We’re expecting an attack on the Ministry by the same enemy who has attacked before, and who has taken control of Azkaban.”

Some of the rookies paled a bit. “That monster has spent the last few days gathering more of its kind, and then blooded them in Norway.” Brown and Elwes looked grim, and more rookies paled. “But we haven’t been idle either - we gained allies who fought those monsters before.” Harry was certain that they had already heard that - rumours travelled faster than paper aeroplanes in the Ministry. “Do you all have your brooms with you?”

They nodded.

“Good. We’ll apparate to the coast, where we’ll set up and brief you.” He took out a map, unfolded it with a flick of his wand, and highlighted the beach at the Isle of Sheppey. “Let’s get going!” With that, Harry apparated.

A few minutes later the last of the volunteers had arrived at the shore, where a few wizard tents had been put up. Harry cast a privacy spell. “Alright. If any one of you reveals what I’m about to tell you, then you’ll find out first-hand what kind of curses Hermione researched to protect the secret.” It was a bluff, Harry knew that - or mostly a bluff. He glared at them until he was confident that they understood the need for secrecy. “We’re facing evil sea spirits who possess the powers of old muggle warships.”

“What?”

“That sounds like something taken straight from The Quibbler!”
“Why did they attack us?”

Harry ignored the comments. “They can walk and run on water, and you all know what their weapons can do.”

“Merlin! We’re dead!”

He resisted the urge to rub his forehead in frustration. What did the rookie expect when he volunteered but to fight the enemy that had attacked the Ministry? “We’re not going to fight them directly. Our allies - other sea spirits - will fight them.” He continued, raising his voice to drown out the speculations. “They have protected the British islands against those threats before, without involving wizards.”

“Can’t they do it alone?”

Harry glared at the speaker. “What’s your name?”

“Henry Burke.”

A pureblood, of course. Harry sighed. “We’re the targets of those spirits. Our allies came to help us; the least we can do is to fight at their side.”

“Why are they attacking us?” Burke asked. The man didn’t seem to give in easily.

“As far as we can tell, that’s because of something Voldemort did during the war. A deal, an alliance, we don’t know.” Harry rolled his eyes when half the assembled Aurors and Hit-Wizards shuddered when he mentioned the name of the Dark Lord. “You have two missions: First, you’ll serve as support for our allies. You’ll be on brooms, and you’ll cast healing and repairing charms as needed. That will be very dangerous, since you’ll be right on the frontlines. The second mission depends on where we’ll fight the enemy. If it’s near Azkaban, you’ll assault and take the island once the enemy is engaged with our allies. Only then, or you’ll end up dead before you reach the rock.”

Harry was certain a few of the group already regretted having volunteered, but the shipgirls needed the support. “Brown, you’re in charge of the group. Elwes, you’re second in command. Stay here, practise the charms needed, and be ready.”

“Alright, Potter,” Brown said.

“I’ll check in with our allies.” Harry nodded, and apparated across the Estuary toCourtsend, where the shipgirls were gathered - with the exception of the carriers and their escorts, who were deployed along the coast.

Hood greeted him with a smile, sailing close to the shore. “Harry!”

It seemed shipgirls were always happy when they were at sea. Or happier. “Hood. Any news from the patrols?”

“Not so far. Ron said that the Navy’s submarines have picked up some acoustic tracks in the North Sea, but they couldn’t identify them.”

“Is he still with the Prime Minister?” Harry’s friend was acting as a liaison, like Arthur.

“Either there, or with the military nearby.” Behind Hood, the other shipgirls had started to gather.

“Do you think the Bismarck will try to sneak into London?” Harry asked.
“If they’re coming from Norway, their escorts will need to replenish. At least those who were called there,” Hood said. “But we don’t know if they replenished in Norway - or if they even need to.” Suddenly she cocked her head sideways. She was listening to the radio, Harry knew. Then she smiled. “Courageous’s planes have spotted them. They’re headed to that island, Azkaban.” Then her smile vanished. “The planes spotted four battleships and two heavy cruisers. And escorts.” Hood turned to the other shipgirls.

“England expects that every ship does her duty.”

*****

North Sea, Dogger Bank, May 11th, 2001

HMS Hood dropped into the slightly rough sea with a splash, and immediately shot back up as her rigging materialised. Next to her, Prince of Wales did the same. A bit further away, Repulse made a greater splash - the older battlecruiser hadn’t been dropped into the sea from a broom before. She recovered quickly though and took up a position to port and to the aft of Prince of Wales.

“This time you’re going to let me take the lead,” Prince of Wales stated.

Hood knew that the Bismarck would gun for her anyway, but nodded. Her friend still felt guilty for ‘letting Hood down’ in the Denmark Strait. Dorsetshire was on the way to Hood’s flank. Above them, Ron and Harry disappeared - apparated away - to fetch the rest of the fleet. And the wizards who’d serve as their repair crew.

“Courageous to Hood: Enemy fleet is holding course. About a hundred and fifty miles from your position.”

Hood acknowledged the message. The Bismarck and her unholy escorts were sailing straight towards Azkaban. The Home Fleet would intercept them before they reached their base.

More splashes. Whooping noises. The destroyers were arriving, apparently having enjoyed the trip. Sikh and Cossack were already cutting through the waves and moving in front of Hood. Acasta and Ardent looked lost for a moment, then fell in port of Repulse. Thirty seconds later, Electra and Achates were dropped, followed by Firedrake and HMAS Vampire, all of who rushed to complete the screen.

Meanwhile, behind them Hermes and Glorious arrived, dropped by Hermione. It was rather close to the coming battle, but it meant they’d be able to launch and recover more strikes before the battlelines clashed. And given what they were up against, they would need that advantage, Hood knew. The scout planes had reported four battleships, without identifying them, but Hood was certain, based on their speed, that they were facing the Bismarck, the Tirpitz, the Scharnhorst and the Gneisenau. The most modern and most dangerous German battleships. And two heavy cruisers.

She let her gaze sweep over her fleet. A British battlecruiser dating back to the Great War, one modern battleship, a treaty cruiser. And herself. The battlecruiser who had been sunk three minutes into her first real battle. This would be a challenge. But the Royal Navy would rise to meet it. As they had done before.

Courageous arrived, followed by broom riders. Aeroplanes started to launch from all three carriers and the wizards and witches quickly gave them a wide berth. Fairey Swordfish from Courageous and Hermes, joined by Sea Gladiators, Gladiators, more Swordfish and even Hurricanes from Glorious.
Hood saw the aeroplanes zip overhead, flying towards the enemy, and felt her heart lift. She turned to her fleet.

“Cruise speed ahead.”

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North Sea, Northeast of Dogger Bank, May 11th, 2001

Bismarck glared at the sky. That annoying aeroplane was still shadowing her fleet. It was keeping its distance, far out of range of her FlaK, but it didn’t let them out of its sight for long. She was tempted to send up her floatplanes to deal with it, but the enemy was likely crewed by wizards, and this was an attempt to lure them away, into an ambush.

It didn’t matter anyway - she had a fleet with her, and her old enemies would be crushed by it! Soon they’d reach Azkaban, where they’d pick up Max Schultz and Narcissa and replenish the fleet - there was still fuel left on the island, in the deeper cells. And then they would strike at England. Sink Hood, if the battlecruiser dared to show up, destroy the Ministry of Magic, burn down London…

“Aeroplanes ahead! Dozens of them!”

The warning from Z26 interrupted her pleasant thoughts. “What?” She turned her attention to the front sector, searching the sky. Where… there! Z26 was correct - dozens of aeroplanes were flying towards them. When she recognised them, she gasped - Swordfish! Those had crippled her before, leading to her sinking. But that had been a lucky shot for the flimsy planes. They wouldn’t get lucky today!

Her escorts started to fire, clouds of FlaK shell explosions dotting the sky. Her own 10.5 cm FlaK 38 started to fire as well. Soon the smaller calibres joined in. But the aeroplanes were not deterred. They dived, descending to fly just above the tops of the waves. One veered off, trailing smoke, crashing into the sea, another followed, but the rest leveled out and pressed on.

“Evasive maneuvers!” Bismarck ordered.

“Aeroplanes above us!”

The panicked scream from Tirpitz alerted her to another attack. Looking up, she noticed aeroplanes high above the fleet, starting to dive. They were caught between dive bombers and torpedo bombers! She cursed, then she recognised the planes. Those were no dive bombers! “Ignore the diving planes, those are fighters!” she ordered. “Focus on the Swordfish!”

A British fighter strafed her, the machine gun bullets hitting her superstructure without much of an effect. Another followed. All over the fleet, fighters buzzed over the ships. They didn’t matter. The dozens of torpedoes about to be dropped into the water were the real danger.

Bismarck spotted several of the gnats making an attack run on her, and turned towards them. Her FlaK fired, and one of the Swordfish disappeared in a fireball - her gunners had learned from their mistakes! The others dropped their torpedoes, but the heavy fire had thrown off their aim - Bismarckthreaded the fish. Near her, Scharnhorst’s gunners shot down another plane - a fighter, this time.

“Gneisenau, evasive action!”

The shout from Erich Giese made Bismarck whip her head around. The smaller battleship was the target of four Swordfish, and it seemed her FlaK was ineffective - they were lined up perfectly, and just as Bismarck’s own gunners started to take aim, the torpedoes dropped.
For a moment, Bismarck held hope. Torpedoes were not that reliable. They malfunctioned. Failed to explode. Ran too deep. Ran in circles. For a moment, it looked like the frantically turning battleship might evade. Then the first torpedo hit, and Gneisenau screamed. Another hit, the battleship’s leg was buckling, part of her rigging torn off, she started to list… and vanished in an explosion.

Bismarck cursed. That shouldn’t have happened! Gneisenau was stronger, better armored than that! A lucky shot, again! How much luck did those British bastards have?

“Hipper!” Blücher’s yell drew her attention to another attack. Three Swordfish had dropped their torpedoes near the heavy cruiser. Admiral Hipper was in the middle of a turn, and once again Bismarck had to watch helplessly as one of her ships was struck. Two hits, with such force that she saw parts of the cruiser’s rigging fly through the air. Hipper was listing heavily, but she hadn’t blown up. Two torpedoes - the cruiser should be able to handle that.

But she couldn’t. Hipper’s list grew as she tried to hold the bleeding hole in her leg together, her face a grimace of pain and panic. She even tugged on her leg, as if she could, like Münchhausen, pull herself out of the water, shortly before she toppled, rolled over and sank beneath the waves.

Bismarck stared, face impassive, while the FlaK fire petered out as the last surviving aeroplanes made their escape. Two ships sunk - a battleship and a heavy cruiser - in one attack. Reports started to come in - all of the fleet had suffered some superficial damage from the fighters, especially the escorts. And Tirpitz, who had also been struck by one torpedo, but counter-flooding had saved her.

Bismarck shook her head. Tirpitz was her sister ship. She had weathered worse attacks before finally succumbing to massive bombs! But she hadn’t had a proper hull for her raising, and so she had come back weaker than before. Like Gneisenau and Admiral Hipper.

And the enemy had aeroplanes, at least two carriers’ worth. Three probably. Bismarck sneered. It would be more difficult than she had thought, but they would sink all of those British ships, and avenge their sunken sisters!

She closed her eyes and reached deep inside herself. Aeroplanes would not be able to fly through the storm she was calling up to protect her fleet.

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North Sea, Northeast of Dogger Bank, May 11th, 2001

HMS Hood was smiling widely when she heard the reports of the first airstrike. One battleship and one cruiser sunk - a far better result than she had expected. Now if the next strike was as successful, then they had this in the bag.

“Weather’s worsening around the enemy fleet,” Courageous reported.

Hood cursed. If there was a storm brewing - contrary to what the weathermen had predicted - then that was the Bismarck’s doing. To prevent another airstrike, no doubt. Which meant they would be facing a fleet at least as strong as theirs, without support from the carriers during the clash. The odds had just changed again. She heard Hermione berate herself over the radio for not having thought of that, and chuckled. That was war. Plans had to be adjusted all the time.

Radar wouldn’t be affected by the storm, and they had another surprise left, at least. Hopefully, it would be enough.

“Prince of Wales, full speed ahead! Fleet, match her speed!”
She heard her friend mutter under her breath as she increased her speed. Prince of Wales hated to be the slowest ship of the formation, to hold the rest back - but it couldn’t be helped. They needed to stay together, if they wanted to win this.

Behind them, the wizards flew on brooms. They’d be affected a lot by the storm as well, but maybe their magic could help them last. Without them, the odds would be even worse. But the Royal Navy would persevere. Tradition and duty demanded it.

The returning aeroplanes passed overhead, waving with their wings as the fleet, especially the destroyers, cheered, with HMAS Vampire wildly swinging her hat around before resuming a more proper decorum.

The storm ahead was growing. Optical rangefinders would be almost useless at long range. And only Repulse, Prince of Wales and herself had radar. At least the Germans would have it even worse.

The fleet sailed on, the raunchy banter between the destroyers that hid their anxiety slowly giving way to grim silence. The sea was rough now, the waves high. The destroyers were struggling - but it would be worse for the Germans. Much worse.

Her radar picked up the enemy van at the same time as Prince of Wales’s did, shortly followed by Repulse’s. “Adjust course fifteen degrees to starboard!” she ordered, to angle her approach and unshadow her rear turrets. Repulse and Prince of Wales followed suit, while the destroyers adjusted their positions relative to the approaching enemy.

She started to aim her guns, adjusting the solution. They were almost in range. “Harry, fire window!”

“Firing window,” Harry responded. A second later, she heard an explosion overhead, and thousands of small aluminium strips filled the air above the fleet. They had been cut to half the wavelength of the enemy’s radar, which Hermione had easily found in the historical works.

“Adjust course ten degree starboard!” Hood ordered, and once again, the fleet complied. That would throw off whatever firing solution the enemy had managed before their radar had been blinded.

“Fire once in range. Focus on the contact in front.” That was either the Bismarck, or the Tirpitz. Hood hoped it was the Tirpitz - according to Hermione, the Tirpitz, as well as Gneisenau, were very likely to be weaker than their sister ships due to the circumstances of their summonings.

She heard shells whirl overhead - they were already in range of the German 38 cm guns - but they were going wide.

Ten seconds later, Prince of Wales’s guns spoke. For a moment, Hood was jealous - her friend’s guns outranged her own. The fast battleship fired one more time until the enemy was finally in range of Hood’s own guns, and Repulse’s.

“Fire!”

Eight 15-inch shells rose from the muzzles of her guns and flew towards the enemy, disappearing into the storm raging ahead. The enemy answered with volleys of their own, but they were blinded by the storm they were hiding in, and the window - kept up by magic spells, and renewed by Harry and Ron - prevented the German radar from ranging them correctly while their own worked perfectly.

Already the leading ship had been hit twice. Hood noticed a battleship in the rear of the enemy formation, slower than the rest. “Shift fire to the enemy at the rear!” she ordered. It was either damaged, or an older model - either way, it would be an easier target.
Prince of Wales was a bit quicker than herself and Repulse, but soon ten 14-inch shells and fourteen 15-inch shells were straddling the new target.

“Adjust course fifteen degrees starboard!” The enemy was trying to close, drawing them into the middle of the storm, but Hood had no intention of obliging them - she would be exploiting their current positional advantage for all it was worth by steering away from the enemy.

The next volleys scored several hits on their target, and it started to slow down even more. Hood grinned. First blood would go to the Royal Navy.

A few enemy shells splashed uncomfortably close though - they were adjusting their aim as well. Probably tracking the shells, somehow. Or guessing really well. Hood suppressed her fear of plunging fire touching off her magazines. They had the advantage now. Another volley was in the air, arcing towards the enemy, disappearing in the storm, and Hood’s radar recorded three more hits. The enemy ship had slowed down so much, it had to be severely damaged and taking on water!

A nearby miss shook her through, causing slight damage to some plating. A lucky shot, she told herself, returning fire. Their target had fallen out of formation, and was left behind by her comrades. Hood almost felt pity for the doomed ship. Then she remembered Tromso, and snarled while her guns spoke again.

More hits. The enemy was dead in the water now. Sinking, most likely.

“Shift aim to the leading enemy ship!” Hood barked. Not a minute too soon - already she could see the smaller enemy ships picking up speed, racing ahead, towards her own screen.

The fleets were about to clash.

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Clash of Fleets

Chapter 8: Clash of Fleets

North Sea, Northeast of Dogger Bank, May 11th, 2001

Bismarck snarled while she fired another broadside. The perfidious Albion had managed to render her FuMO 23 search radar sets useless! She was guessing the positions of the enemy ships, which meant she might as well fire blindly! Those cowards were once again using trickery to avoid facing her in open combat!

Even worse, while her own fleet was blinded, the enemy’s radar was working, somehow - they had pounded Tirpitz despite the storm hiding her. Bismarck’s sister ship was doomed. Her main batteries were disabled and water was pouring into her hull through several leaks, her damage worsened by the force of the storm. Bismarck ground her teeth as she watched Tirpitz struggle in the rough sea. Each time the battleship cut through the waves she was listing a bit more, one step closer to sinking.

She would be avenged, though! Bismarck ordered Max Schultz and Narcissa to sortie from Azkaban, and attack the British from the rear. That should at least disrupt their formation. Maybe they’d even manage to sink a carrier. After Max Schultz had acknowledged the order, Bismarck stopped feeding her power into the storm and addressed the fleet: “Close with the enemy! Flank Speed ahead!”

Her escorts cheered and rushed forward. Bismarck, Scharnhorst and Blücher followed. The other battleship had been hit a few times, but hadn’t suffered any serious damage. Now it was Bismarck’s turn - a dozen shells stuck the sea around her, the explosions battering her sides, but her hull held.

A close-quarter battle would be brutal, but Bismarck was certain she would prevail - she had held out alone for hours against an entire fleet, their shells unable to penetrate her armour. She smiled, baring her teeth, as she left the storm and finally laid eyes upon her enemies. Her radar was still useless, but her optical rangefinders were the finest ever built!

Her smile widened when she recognised Hood, Repulse and Prince of Wales. Two outdated battlecruisers, and one battleship she had fought before. A pack of destroyers and one cruiser - her fleet could handle them! She’d sink those relics!

Ahead of her, the destroyers were zig-zagging to throw off the enemy’s aim as they raced toward the British line. She ordered Blücher to fall back a bit - the heavy cruiser’s armour couldn’t take as much as her own and Scharnhorst’s.

“A concentrate your fire on the Repulse!” The old battlecruiser would be easier to sink than the Prince of Wales. Bismarck would let Hood see her friends get destroyed and know despair before sinking her. She adjusted her course slightly, unshadowing turrets Caesar and Dora, and fired a broadside. Scharnhorst and Blücher followed, though they were still outside the effective range of their guns.

The enemy fired as well, and Bismarck adjusted her course to present a harder target. Her own shots straddled the Repulse, close enough to briefly hide the ship behind the water thrown up by the impact. The British ships were still sailing away, trying to keep their distance from Bismarck. But Prince of Wales was the slowest ship present - sooner or later they’d catch up.

The enemy was focusing on Scharnhorst - of course, they wanted to destroy her with plunging fire at range - the other battleship’s deck armour was half the strength of Bismarck’s! Scharnhorst took a
hit, but didn’t falter, and returned fire.

Bismarck’s guns spoke again and again. The Repulse tried to manoeuvre, but to no avail - she had her target’s measure now. Her next volley scored two hits. Smoke started to rise from the battlecruiser’s superstructure. The time the shells spent in the air slowly grew shorter as the distance shrank.

She saw that Scharnhorst received another hit, which ripped into her side. She was leaking oil from her rigging and bleeding from the gash in her side, but even that didn’t deter her. Then Bismarck’s next volley scored on the Repulse again, and she saw the battlecruiser stumble, veering off to the side before correcting her course again. The British ship was slowing down though - hobbled.

Bismarck grinned. Would her enemy abandon the crippled battlecruiser? She doubted it. And she was correct - the entire enemy formation was now turning to face her, the British destroyers whirling around with such haste, they almost seemed to capsize.

With the British now facing her, the distance started to shrink rapidly. Soon enough Scharnhorst’s and Blücher’s guns started to tell as well, battering the Repulse. In return, a British heavy cruiser added her fire. Scharnhorst had suffered more hits, but nothing vital had been damaged.

After five minutes, the Repulse was reeling, her armour holed. One of her turrets had been silenced, and the others’ rate of fire had slowed down. She was limping and swaying on her feet. Bismarck hissed with glee - revenge was hers!

The destroyers were in range of each other now, and their smaller guns started to rapidly exchange fire. Bismarck didn’t pay them much mind - her prey were the three capital ships. Her next volley hit, and one of Repulse’s remaining turrets fell silent - jammed or destroyed, she couldn’t tell. Scharnhorst’s fire struck the battlecruiser’s legs, and the enemy was brought to her knees, both legs bleeding now.

“Yes!” Scharnhorst yelled. She turned her head to smile at Bismarck. Before she could say anything though, several shells struck her. Bismarck saw the battleship’s head snap back, half her face torn up - half her rangefinders gone, she noted - before turning slightly. Her front was holed, her armour smashed, and one turret had been blown off the rigging.

She wasn’t beaten though - not Scharnhorst. Shaking her head, sending oil and parts flying, she screamed, and her remaining two turrets fired - at the Prince of Wales. For a moment, Bismarck wanted to finish the Repulse. She wanted to kill her enemies. Common sense prevailed though - the battlecruiser was finished, she’d be able to sink her at leisure once the rest of the enemies were dealt with. “Focus on the Prince of Wales!” she ordered, her own turrets shifting their aim already.

She’d send that British battleship to the bottom of the sea!

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North Sea, Northeast of Dogger Bank, May 11th, 2001

Ron Weasley cursed as he struggled to keep his broom under control when the water thrown up by a shell that struck close to Repulse washed over his Shield Charm. He was almost pushed into the sea by the sheer mass that hit him, but he managed to pull up in time to avoid smashing into a wave. Veering to the left, then to the right - he knew no one was aiming at him, but old habits were hard to break - he closed in on the battlecruiser.

Up close, she looked horrible. Her clothes were torn to shreds and stained with oil and burn marks.
She was on her knees, pushing herself up with one arm, the other limp at her side, oil dripping from deep gashes in it. Her legs were worse - one was almost torn off, the other shredded. He couldn’t imagine the pain she must be feeling, kneeling on them. Just before he reached her, a tall wave washed over her. For a moment, he feared she had sunk, but she reappeared.

A mangled part of her rigging tore loose right then, and he saw that her legs were almost disappearing in the sea. He held out his wand. “Reparo! Reparo! Reparo! Reparo!”

A shudder went through Repulse, and he saw her eyes widen, blinking, as she rose from the water. Another wave swallowed her while he circled her. As soon as he saw her head cut through the wave, he cast again. “Reparo! Reparo! Reparo!”

She started to get back on her feet, still swaying, but no longer sinking. Her rigging was still smashed, though - he could see one turret shaking as it tried to swivel, but the other two turrets were dead weight, one of them smoking.

Repulse was saying something, but he couldn’t hear her over the noise of the battle. She was smiling though. He twisted around, flying alongside her. “Reparo! Reparo! Reparo!”

Her rigging slowly seemed to restore itself - but her main turrets were still not moving. Well, he could just keep casting repair charms until she was wholly fixed. He and Harry had done it for Hood before. “Reparo! Reparo! Reparo!”

One turret was turning again, the barrels moving up and down as Repulse was turning towards the enemy. Ron tapped his radio button. “Repulse, hold your fire!” he yelled. If he was close to the battlecruiser when she fired her main guns, he’d go deaf and probably crash into the sea!

“Get clear!” was her answer. “Help the others! Repulse re-engaging the enemy!”

Ron had learned enough about battlecruisers and shipgirls to not even try to stop her. Cursing, he turned around and flew away as fast as he could. The shockwave from the guns still battered him, and his ears were ringing despite the plugs in them.

He flew up to get a better picture of the battle. Hood and Prince of Wales as well as Dorsetshire were exchanging fire with the Bismarck and her escorts. They looked fine, for the moment at least. Up ahead, the destroyers were savaging each other, or so it looked to him. He touched the enchanted mirror stuck to his collar. Immediately, yells and screams filled his ears - the Aurors and Hit-Wizards had far less radio discipline than the shipgirls as they darted around the destroyers, repairing them.

He saw one Auror break off, and fly straight at an enemy destroyer.

“Burke! Burke! Break off! Break off!” Ron heard Brown shout.

But the Auror seemed to be past listening. “Take that, you damn monst...”

Ron shuddered - one second, the red speck with a blue glow was flying, the next second it was gone. Direct hit by an anti-aircraft gun. “Damn fool,” he muttered, wondering what had possessed the man to charge despite his orders. He pushed forward.

Another one, a Hit-Wizard since they were wearing grey robes, was flying near a destroyer that seemed to be on fire, despite the waves crashing over the struggling shipgirl. He recognised her - Vampire, holding on to her hat with one hand as she was turning around in the midst of a hail of shells, almost toppling over while narrowly avoided another hit. The Hit-Wizard was close on the destroyer’s heels, wand flashing. Just as Vampire straightened up, though, she disappeared in a fireball that engulfed the Hit-Wizard as well.
Ron blinked, then ground his teeth. He knew the destroyers were ships, shipgirls, but they looked and acted like normal sixth or seventh year girls on land. For a moment, he wanted to dive, and destroy whatever monster had just killed Vampire and the Hit-Wizard. He didn’t, though. People were counting on him to do his task.

He picked out the closest destroyer who seemed to need help - Sikh, he recognised her by her headdress and darker skin - and started to fly towards her, hoping his corkscrewing and evasive flying would throw off the enemies’ aim - the destroyers were so close to each other now that the enemy’s anti-aircraft artillery was effective against brooms approaching the British shipgirls. And he had just seen what a hit from those cannons did to a wizard.

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North Sea, Dogger Bank, May 11th, 2001

Hermione Granger didn’t hate flying on a broom, not really. But she much preferred to stay on the ground. Unfortunately, she was currently in the middle of the North Sea, so unless she wanted to swim, she had to fly. Or float, next to Hermes, Glorious and Courageous. Officially, she was there to support them - repair them if needed. But she knew Harry and Ron had assigned her to the three carriers since they would also stay away from the battle, far out of range of the enemy guns.

She didn’t really mind. Not too much, at least. She wasn’t cut out to fly a broom in combat, much less when anti-aircraft artillery was firing at her. And, as Ron and Harry knew, but hadn’t mentioned, she was close enough to Azkaban to fly there and prepare the ritual to seal Voldemort’s soul shard, once the Bismarck was sunk.

Her enchanted mirror chirped and she heard an excited-sounding voice. “This is Morton! Two enemy creatures are leaving Azkaban Island, direction North.”

Hermione cursed. Two enemies - that would be the light cruiser and the destroyer that had survived the battle in the Thames Estuary. She tapped the radio button stuck to her collar. “Hermes! Pickets report that the light cruiser and destroyer have left Azkaban and are headed our way.”

The carrier turned her head and looked at her, nodding. The three carriers were launching aeroplanes, gathering a strike since the enemy fleet had left the storm protecting it from air attacks. Half of it was already in the air.

“Hood to Hermes: Send the whole strike against those two enemy ships.”

“Hermes to Hood: Acknowledged.”

Hermione bit her lower lip. She would have preferred if the aeroplanes attacked the main enemy fleet. The carriers could deal with a light cruiser and a destroyer. Between them they had far more guns than the two monsters coming at them, and while the enemy had torpedoes, Hermione could repair the shipgirls. But Glorious was already looking nervous about being caught by another surface force, and Harry and Ron wouldn’t want her to risk herself. So she stayed silent and watched as the Fairey Swordfish formed up and took off, followed by Gladiators.

She tapped her crystal. “Granger to Morton: Shadow the enemies, but stay out of their range. Send two flyers to scout the island - carefully.” There might be more enemies hiding on the island. And they needed to know if the island was safe for the ritual.

“Ah… yes, ma’am.” Morton didn’t sound very happy, but Hermione didn’t care. They were at war, and everyone had to do their part. And in her opinion, waiting while her friends were fighting for
their lives was far worse than risking her own life.

Besides, she thought, following the aeroplanes on her broom, compared to what Harry and Ron were doing, shadowing the enemy was rather safe. Or should be.

It took the Swordfish 20 minutes to reach the enemy, who was steaming towards them. The aeroplanes were slower than a top of the line broom - and Harry had bought her a Firebolt, just so she could outrace most enemies in the air, should she need to - even she should be able to fly straight.

Hermione didn’t spot the enemies before the biplanes started to descend. She stopped her broom - carefully, of course, she was no Seeker - and pulled out her Omnioculars, zooming in on the two pale girls racing through the waves.

Both were firing their anti-aircraft guns, and manoeuvring wildly. That would make it very difficult for the torpedo bombers to hit them. Although something seemed off… Hermione focused on the leading girl, who had to be Max Schultz, a destroyer, according to Hood’s description. The creature’s mouth was wide open, her face a mask of hatred and she seemed to be screaming her lungs out as the Gladiators strafed her, machine guns stitching lines over the girl’s upper body.

Hermione’s eyes widened when she saw that the shipgirl started to fire her main guns as well - despite how useless those were against aircraft. Was she panicking? The witch drew a hissing breath when she remembered that Max Schultz had been sunk on the Dogger Bank, after hitting a mine, trying to save her sister ship, which had been bombed by their own planes. If she was having flashbacks… “Gladiators, focus on the destroyer in front!” she ordered. “Distract it!”

The fighter biplanes did as ordered, and the destroyer seemed to go berserk, her head shaking wildly as she tried to shoot her attackers down. Hermione saw one Gladiator get hit while climbing after an attack run, starting to burn before it crashed into the sea. But that had bought the Swordfish attacking Max Schultz time to drop their torpedoes. Hermione saw how the destroyer’s rage gave way to panic when she finally spotted the torpedoes closing in, saw her trying to evade, turning desperately, and saw the explosions when two torpedoes hit. For a moment, Max Schultz seemed to freeze, one leg blown off. Then she toppled over and splashed into the sea, vanishing in seconds.

The other enemy, a light cruiser they had not identified so far, had been faring better, her wild, erratic course having thrown off the attackers. She also seemed to be ignoring the Gladiators. But the remaining Swordfish were attacking her now. One was hit and vanished into a wave, disintegrating upon impact, the others dropped their payload. The cruiser was luckier than Max Schultz though - only one torpedo struck her, and she managed to limp on, one leg trailing oil and parts, towards Azkaban, harassed by Gladiators.

“One destroyer sunk, one light cruiser, damaged, headed back to Azkaban,” Hermione informed the fleet and the Aurors.

“We’re pulling the scouts back!” came the hasty reply from the pickets.

Hermione didn’t begrudge them their caution - but she wasn’t looking forward to make landfall on an island with a light cruiser guarding it. There would have to be another air strike launched to sink her.

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North Sea, Northeast of Dogger Bank, May 11th, 2001

Harry Potter sent another load of Window up above Hood and Prince of Wales, watching the
aluminium strips form a cloud which slowly started to disperse. Those two warships as well as Dorsetshire were exchanging fire with the enemy capital ships at closer range now. Prince of Wales was getting the worst of it - part of her rigging was burning, and two turrets had fallen silent, one a wreck of bent and torn metal. Dorsetshire and Hood didn’t show much damage though - not that he was an expert.

Although the enemy was hurting as well. He quickly checked through his Omnioculars. One of the monsters was struggling in the heavy sea, barely moving anymore, with most of her rigging destroyed. Another was listing a bit, oil running down her pale body. Her guns were blazing, though. And the Bismarck was sailing ahead. She looked scorched, but didn’t seem to be seriously damaged. The expression on her face, full of hatred, made him shudder and he felt as if his forehead itched.

He turned his attention back to the Royal Navy. Another volley from the Bismarck reached Prince of Wales, and the battered battleship shook with another hit, the rest of the shells splashing into the water near her. A few seconds later, three more shells fell into the sea. That had to have been Scharnhorst. Which meant Harry had about thirty seconds to fly down and repair - heal - the battleship a bit, before the next volley would arrive.

He leaned forward and dived. Unlike in Quidditch, he had a Shield Charm up, which made it harder to judge his speed. If he made a mistake he’d crash into the sea, right where tons of explosives would soon hit again. The shockwaves would kill him, even if he survived the impact. But Prince of Wales needed help now.

He grinned and yelled, and sped up even more, flying almost straight down. A few sparks showed where aluminium strips were brushed aside by his Shield Charm. The waves grew larger and larger. Unlike a Quidditch pitch, the sea was not flat either. A few more seconds… now! He pulled with all his strength, struggling to control his broom. Had he misjudged… a wave rose in front of him, higher than the rest. He cursed, and rolled, pulling to the side as well, bleeding speed.

It wasn’t enough - he crashed into the top of the wave, and his shield shattered. The water hit him, battered him, almost swept him from his broom, and for a horrible instant he thought he had crashed. Then he broke through the wave, drenched but still flying. Alive! And close to Prince of Wales.

He drew his wand and started to cast.

“Reparo! Reparo! Reparo!”

Before he could cast a fourth time he was past the battleship, and climbing up again. Behind him, the next volley arrived. The explosions shook his broom, and he bent low, praying no fragments found him.

They didn’t, and he hastily recast his Shield Charm at a safer altitude, taking deep breaths. That had been close.

“Thank you!” he heard Prince of Wales through the radio.

Her guns - three turrets now, bellowed. Hood’s followed. Dorsetshire with her faster guns was keeping up a steady stream of shells. Harry glanced at the enemy again, just in time. He saw the wounded battleship getting hit once, twice, three times, in her chest. Oil and pale flesh flew away. For a second, she gaped, then her upper body vanished in a fireball.

“Scharnhorst destroyed,” Hood calmly reported. “Switch fire to enemy cruiser. What’s the status of the enemy ships near Azkaban?”
“We haven’t spotted the light cruiser,” Hermione reported. “She has to be on the island.”

Harry cursed. They needed the island for their ritual. A ship would not be stable enough in this weather, and no other land was close enough. He checked the destroyers through his Omnoculars. Sikh and Cossack, easily recognisable due to their headgear, were blazing away at an enemy who was reeling under the assault. Harry could see her rigging was already in tatters, and she was weakly firing back with just one gun. The two British shipgirls had not been left unscathed, but they looked far better. Further away, one shipgirl was being propped up by another while Ron was repairing her. He thought it was Acasta, but it was hard to tell with all the smoke one of them was releasing. He also saw a few more brooms flitting around - but not as many as there should be.

He saw just two more enemies, both burning, under fire from three British destroyers he didn’t recognize either - all of them were covered with soot and oil, but sailing parallel to the enemy, their guns firing constantly. Then the enemies suddenly turned, charging straight at the British destroyers.

All three shipgirls instantly focused on the leading enemy. Harry saw the creature shudder under the impact, pale flesh ripped away under the assault. Yet she kept going, on a collision course, a mad grin on her face. Then one shell hit her knee, stopping her. She listed to the side, and before she regained her balance in the rough sea, more shells struck her, and she fell down, vanishing into the sea.

But the other enemy had used the sacrifice of her comrade and was now far too close to be stopped, even as the destroyers shifted their fire. Harry could only watch helplessly as the burning monster slammed into one destroyer - Firedrake, he recognised her now - and the two toppled over, falling down and disappearing into the waves.

Neither resurfaced.

Hermione’s voice broke through the rage Harry felt right then. “Harry, Ron - we need to get to Azkaban!”

She was right. They needed to get the ritual ready, and seal the soul fragment once the Bismarck was sunk, or the monster would return with another body. He glanced back at Hood and Prince of Wales, which were now in range of the smaller guns - their secondaries. That would make flying close enough to heal and repair them too dangerous anyway. They would have to finish this battle without him or Ron.

Ron had come to the same conclusion. “Brown, have your people repair the destroyers, then move to support Hood!” Harry heard him order.

“All right. Moving to Azkaban,” Harry said, tapping his radio and his mirror at the same time. “Good luck, Hood.”

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North Sea, Northeast of Dogger Bank, May 11th, 2001

HMS Hood held her course while at her flank, Prince of Wales was slowly falling back, too damaged despite the magic repairs to keep up with the battlecruiser. Her guns - those left - were still firing though. Ahead, what remained of the Scharnhorst - a few burning pieces of wreckage and oil slicks - were slowly disappearing in the waves. Behind them, Repulse’s remaining guns were firing, shells arcing towards the heavy cruiser that was still trailing the Bismarck. They splashed all around the enemy ship, scoring no hits though. Dorsetshire’s fire was hitting the cruiser, but if her shells were doing any critical damage, Hood couldn’t spot it. Her attention remained focused on the
Bismarck anyway. The enemy was concentrating their fire on Hood, and had been doing so for a few minutes already.

Her nemesis was charging towards her, forward turrets firing. Hood grit her teeth and braced for their impact. They were already in range for the enemy’s secondaries, but she barely felt the smaller shells that hit her. Four 15-inch shells arced down. Three went wide - Hood had changed course in time. The fourth though hit her port rigging, smashing through one of her 4-inchers. She longed to fire back - her secondaries were already firing rapidly, leaving pockmarks and scorched stains on the pale skin of the monster facing her - but she knew her duty. As long as the Bismarck was shooting at her, her friends were safe. The cruiser fired as well, 8-inchers. At that range, Hood’s armour belt could handle them. And it did.

Her own turrets were swinging towards the enemy cruiser, the Blücher she thought, who was manoeuvring to throw off her firing solution. Hood grinned - she was a battlecruiser, built to hunt down and destroy enemies just like this one. She veered starboard, just enough to unshadow her astern turrets. Then her main guns thundered, and eight 15-inch shells flew towards the doomed cruiser. Half of them hit, smashing into the monster. One reduced a turret to a flaming wreck, tearing off part of the rigging it was mounted on as well. Another ripped off a chunk of Blücher’s thigh in a shower of oil and metal. And the last two struck the monster’s chest, one going straight through it, the other exploding inside her belly. The struck cruiser stopped weaving between the waves with a shocked expression, arms cradling her smoking belly. Her wounded leg was getting battered by the waves already - she wouldn’t last much longer.

“Dorsetshire, finish off the cruiser. Repulse, Prince of Wales - switch fire to the Bismarck!”

Hood’s own turrets were already swinging towards the approaching battleship. Two more shells hit her, one passing through her arm without doing much damage, the other striking an angling blow to her A-turret, which glanced off. The battlecruiser grinned - at the distance they were now, the danger of plunging fire striking her weak deck armour was gone. Her armour belt was just a little bit worse than Prince of Wales’s, and her turrets were even better protected.

Behind her, Dorsetshire started to riddle the crippled Blücher with 8-inch shells while Repulse and Prince of Wales turned to aim at the Bismarck. Hood paid no attention to them. Her enemy was in front, coming straight at her. She bared her teeth, and fired her forward guns. One hit, smashing anti-aircraft gun and setting off some ammunition, the others straddled the Bismarck. In return, a dozen smaller shells hit Hood, ripping into her skin and rigging. She ignored them. She’d sink her enemy, even if she had to use her own corpse to drag the Bismarck down to the depths of the sea!

She changed course. If she manoeuvred just right, she could launch her torpedoes. But the distance was not yet close enough to guarantee a hit. It was shrinking quickly, though. Salvoes from Prince of Wales and Repulse arrived, most of the shells falling into the sea around the enemy battleship. Hood saw three shells strike, but two hit the armour belt with no noticeable effect. Another hit the superstructure though, blowing away a director. Then her own guns finished reloading, and fired. One shell smashed into the enemy’s leg, leaving a deep gash. Two more punctured the superstructure, hopefully destroying vital systems. The rest missed.

“Enemy cruiser sunk!” Dorsetshire reported.

Hood briefly glanced over her shoulder. The Blücher had toppled, sinking amidst a spreading slick of oil. “Keep your distance and engage the Bismarck with your guns!” the battlecruiser ordered. The enemy’s secondary batteries were still firing, and the cruiser couldn’t stand up to them at the range needed for a torpedo attack.

A 5.9-inch shell bounced off her forehead, leaving her dazed for just a second. Shaking her head, she
was about to retaliate, when the 15-inchers struck her. Hood hissed in pain when one of her turrets was hit in the barbette, jamming up at once. Another shell found a weak spot in her armour belt and hit three of her boilers. And a third blew through her shoulder, throwing her back. Grinding her teeth, she returned fire, scoring another hit on the enemy’s armour belt. Her four-inchers were getting decimated by the enemy’s 5.9-inch guns. Panting, she wiped some oil from her face, and pressed on.

The next salvo from Bismarck wrecked her foremast and the rangefinder of her B-turret. Hood had to blink to keep her enemy in her sights. Her six remaining guns fired, raggedly now. Parts of her rigging were on fire. The Bismarck wasn’t looking much better though - two more volleys from Repulse and Prince of Wales had struck her, as well as a dozen shells from Dorsetshire. The battleship’s skin was scorched, torn in many spots - Hood knew her own skin must look the same - and smoke poured out of several holes in her rigging. But her guns were still firing. More shells hit Hood, and she lost more boilers, slowing her down. She could see Bismarck grin ferally. Her enemy thought she was beaten.

Hood snarled. She wasn’t beaten yet! Turning towards starboard, she presented her broadside, and her turrets fired again, seconds before her B-Turret was destroyed by a direct hit below its armored front. But now Bismarck was close enough. Her port torpedo mounts had been destroyed, but her starboard mounts were still intact. Hood began to turn towards port. More shells struck her, one glancing off her head, costing her her radar. Another struck the wrecked B-Turret, but the magazines had been flooded already. Her return fire blew parts off the enemy rigging, finally silencing one turret. And then her torpedo tubes were lined up, and two 21-inch torpedoes shot into the water.

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Bismarck was laughing. Her old enemy, brought low! Helplessly floundering under her fire! Her armour was smashed, her turrets destroyed, her rigging wrecked. All that was left was the coup de grâce to put the battlecruiser out of her misery. She wanted to savour the moment of her triumph. Another volley from the crippled battleship fell around her, one shell glancing off her armour belt. Bismarck sneered - once the Hood was sunk, she’d finish off the rest.

The Hood was turning in front of her - as if presenting her starboard side would save her! Bismarck laughed, her turrets reloading, as she lined up the salvo that would finish the enemy. Then she saw the twin trails in the water, and her eyes, so far untouched by enemy fire, widened. Torpedoes!

She turned away, throwing off her own aim - even though she had good torpedo protection, and had weathered such attacks, she remembered what one hit to her rudder had done. Not today though! She turned rapidly, trying her hardest to evade the closing torpedoes. Just a bit more…

The Hood’s guns had fired again and three shells smashed into her right leg, throwing her off-course as she lost two screws. She tried to compensate, but she wasn’t quick enough - both torpedoes hit, and she shuddered under the impact as weakened armour buckled, and water rushed into her and systems fell silent.

She screamed, with pain and frustration. She would sink the Hood! Panting, she struggled to hold her course as her remaining turrets were brought to bear on her prey. But more shells struck her - the Repulse and the Prince of Wales were still firing. Bismarck’s superstructure was mangled even more, one hitting her head and wrecking her main fire control director. Turret Anton fired anyway, but missed. Then it was Hood’s turn again, and Bismarck shuddered as four more 15-inch shells struck her, again in her already damaged leg. She fired back - then blinked. Her turrets were not responding. She glanced to her side - part of her rigging had been torn off. She had only one turret left. Her 15-cm guns were reduced to two, and her FlaK was gone altogether, destroyed by the constant fire from the Hood’s secondary batteries and the heavy cruiser.

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But the Hood… she’d sink the Hood! She’d ram her! She’d blow up a magazine! Bismarck’s last turret fired again, one shell ripping through the battlecruiser’s side, silencing another 4-incher. Almost! Anton was reloading. Just another volley…

Bismarck blinked. Why was the sea rising to starboard? Why were the waves growing so tall…

She realised that she was toppling, her leg blown off, right before she hit the water and rolled over. It didn’t hurt, she thought, as her face sank beneath the waves, and the sounds of battle faded.

Air bubbles trailed from her mouth and oil leaked from the holes in her body as she slowly sank towards the bottom of the sea. It was peaceful, she realised. Almost… almost…

Darkness swallowed her.

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North Sea, Azkaban, May 11th, 2001

“Courageous to Landing Force: No sign of the enemy cruiser. She has to be hiding on the island.”

Ron Weasley clenched his jaw while he flew towards Azkaban, a foot or two above the waves. He was all too aware of the fate of the last wizards trying to fly to that island, and even with the Sea Gladiators and Swordfish circling above the island, ready to pounce on any enemy, he couldn’t help but be nervous. Doubly so since Harry and Hermione were coming as well. With them were half a dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards who had been acting as pickets. Ron would tackle a Death Eater hideout with that kind of force - had done so with less - but to face a shipgirl? Even one hiding on land, where she was not quite as powerful?

But there was no choice. They had to do the ritual, or this battle would have been for naught, and Azkaban was the only piece of land in range. They had to take the island. He only hoped that their plan to deal with a shipgirl on land would work.

The rocky shores loomed in front of him now, and he started to pull up. Harry, as usual, was climbing rapidly already, shooting up as if this was a Quidditch match. Hermione would be cursing Quidditch, brooms and flying in general by now, he knew. But she’d manage.

Harry reached the edge of the cliff and leveled his broom, wand ready. Ron held his breath, cursing his slower broom, but nothing happened. He reached the edge himself right when Harry jumped off his Firebolt, taking cover behind a rock nearby. Ron followed his example, even though the rock wouldn’t stand up to a naval gun - old habits were hard to break.

Hermione landed behind them, grunting when she dropped from her broom to the ground and went prone at once, then crawled up to their position. Then the rest of their force followed - three Aurors and two Hit-Wizards. They first hovered over the sea, presenting perfect targets for anyone on the island, then dismounted.

When they didn’t seem to move right away, Ron yelled: “Take cover!” That made them move, at last, and they disappeared behind rocks and - Ron cursed - a bush.

“Useless curse fodder,” Harry whispered. “How much time do we have left?”

“Originally, the Bismarck took hours to sink,” Hermione said. “But the Hood was sunk in minutes.”

Ron knew that they had a small window of opportunity. They couldn’t lure the Bismarck into their ritual circle, like they had managed with Voldemort. So they had to prepare the ritual, and then start it
once the Bismarck had been sunk. And for that they needed a safe spot for the circle. Which meant they had to find and deal with that cruiser.

He yelled to the hiding Ministry forces again: “Follow us, we advance!”

Then he nodded to Harry, took a deep breath, and turned around the right corner of the rock while his friend rounded the other corner. The next cover was about twenty yards away. He sprinted over rocks and patches of grass, expecting a curse - or worse, a shell - to fly towards him any second. It didn’t, and he dropped into a small pit, more like a dent in the rocky ground. Hermione rushed past him, towards the ruins of a wall.

Harry moved up on the left side, then Ron sprinted forward, rolling behind the rubble left from Azkaban’s main gate. Still no resistance - had the cruiser escaped somehow? Despite the patrols in the air? Ron glanced at Hermione, then the two of them entered the prison proper. Or what was left of it.

The walls were gone, as were some buildings. Nothing but rubble remained of them. But the main tower above the cells still stood, and so did the barracks.

“Barracks, then cells,” Ron said. They could be searched quickly, and they wouldn’t have to risk an enemy at their back when they entered the tower.

Harry nodded, and turned towards the Ministry wizards and witches who were just now arriving. “Cover the tower, but do not enter!”

They spread out in a ragged line to encircle the tower. Ron wanted to straighten them out, but they had to press on. He took point, and rushed to the door of the barracks. He didn’t bother checking if it was locked - a glance back, and Hermione blew it away with a Blasting Curse. Ron went in low, jumping through the dust cloud thrown up by her spell, and rolled over a surprisingly smooth floor.

Harry followed at once, covering the other side. Someone had remodeled - the desk and Head Warden’s quarters were gone. And the door to the main quarters for the guards was open. Ron moved ahead, Harry right behind him, just as Hermione entered the building.

Those doors were open, at an angle. Ron peeked through, and recoiled as soon as he spotted something moving in there.

Hermione immediately blew this door away as well, sending splinters inside. A yell told Ron that at least one had found its mark. No gunfire erupted though - it looked as if those monsters couldn’t summon their rigging on land, like shipgirls. Which left them with superhuman endurance, strength and resistance.

They waited, expecting an attack through the door, but nothing of the sort happened. Ron held his breath - was that sobbing he heard? He glanced at Harry. Judging by his friend’s expression, he had heard it as well. Had a guard or prisoner been left alive?

Ron rounded the corner, leading with his wand, using the wall to shield his body. There was a pool where the beds had been, crudely made and filled with water. Ron smelled the sea, and blood. Something rose from the pool. Someone - a pale, nude girl, the only color on her her red eyes. She looked familiar, somehow, but he couldn’t place her. She was shivering, holding an arm over her chest, the other dangling at her side.

For a moment, they stared at each other. That wasn’t how Ron had imagined this meeting would happen. Then Harry entered behind him, and those red eyes widened.
“P… P… Potter!” she screamed. “D…Draco! Draco!”

Then she rushed at them, at Harry, yelling incoherently, arms stretched out, fingers curled like claws. Ron’s instincts took over, and he cast a Blasting Curse without thinking. The spell hit her shoulder, staggering her, but where a human would have lost half their chest, this monster could still move her arm!

Harry dropped to the ground a second before she tried to smash his head in, and rolled away, a Reductor Curse hitting her leg. She screamed, and turned to follow him. Ron sent another Blasting Curse into her back. Hermione had told him that this was the curse most likely to work best.

The creature shrieked, and turned to face him. “W…W…Weasley!”

Ron was about to hit her in the head with his next curse while Harry slid around her towards the door when he recognised her face. It was younger, and looked slightly different, but… “Malfoy? Narcissa Malfoy?” How the...

Her charge interrupted his thoughts, and he was not quick enough to evade her clumsy strike completely. Her blow clipped his Shield Charm, shattering it, and sent him through the door, almost barrelling Hermione over.

“M...Mudblood! All of you!”

Hermione had been casting spells at the pool, Ron realised as he got up again. Vanishing the water - if it was water in the first place. The former pureblood witch charged at his friend, but she crashed into a stone wall that rose in front of her. Harry slipped out, dragging Hermione with him while the wall started to crack.

Hermione shook herself loose from Harry, then aimed her wand at the wall’s foot. “Make a hole!” she yelled, and started casting. Ron understood, and started to cast as well, followed by Harry. They managed to form a pit by the time the wall was shattered. The monster stopped at the pit, staring at them.

Then Harry hit the ground below her feet with a Blasting Curse, and she fell down. Hermione rushed forward and pointed her wand down, muttering. Then she threw herself backwards a second before green fire shot up from the pit, and the screams of rage of the creature that had been Narcissa Malfoy turned to shrieks of horror and pain as she burned alive in Fiendfyre.

Ron swallowed as the screams grew louder, turning into guttural howls. “How long will she…?” he asked, trailing off. Any witch or wizard would have died in seconds in that inferno.

Hermione pressed her lips together, casting a Bubble-Head Charm before answering. “Longer than we can wait.”

Ron stared at her, then nodded.

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Minutes later, they still heard the inhuman screams from the burning pit as they prepared the ground for the ritual. Hermione pulled out a small plate of black stone and enlarged it, revealing the circle she had prepared beforehand. Harry leveled a space and levitated the plate over. Ron started to adjust the ground - it had to be perfectly even.

Then his radio crackled. “The Bismarck has been sunk! I repeat: The Bismarck has been sunk!”
While cheers filled the channel, the three of them worked even harder. Time was running out. Hermione set the sealing crystal with the other soul fragments in the centre of the circle. Then she touched the runes surrounding it with her wand, and they lit up, displaying the intricate designs Hermione had created years ago. All three looked at each other, then slit their palms, letting the blood fall on to the runes. The sacrifices made, they started chanting.

This time though, the soul fragments started to fade, instead of being pulled into the crystal. Ron knew what that meant: There was no Soul Anchor left to hold them. Voldemort was no more.

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Chapter 9: Aftermath

North Sea, Azkaban, May 11th, 2001

When she saw the green shade dissipate, Hermione Granger was elated - Voldemort was finally dead! Truly dead! She hugged Ron and Harry, crying with relief. The Dark Lord was dead, and her friends were alive. The nightmare was over. She barely noticed that her friends were crying as well, and kissing her. She wanted to lose herself in the moment.

But with the tension leaving her, she realised just how exhausted she was. Her legs were trembling and if not for her friends, she would have sunk to her knees. It didn’t matter any more anyway. The battle was won. The enemy defeated. Even the screams of the thing Narcissa Malfoy had been turned into had ended - she must have burned out. Hermione should have felt terrible about killing the former witch in such a cruel manner, but Fiendfyre had been the only magical way she had been able to think of for killing a shipgirl. Ships, even warships, were vulnerable to fire, while almost all spells would barely make a dent in even the weakest destroyer.

The witch suddenly blinked. Damaged ships. She gasped, surprising Harry and Ron. “We need to call the shipgirls to Azkaban - they’ll need to be healed, not just repaired.”

She felt Harry tense up in her arms. “Damn! I should have thought of that. After the last battle, Hood was badly hurt as soon as she stepped on land, despite her rigging having been fully repaired.”

Ron was talking into their communication mirror already. “Landing Force to Hood: Take the fleet to Azkaban, but wait with making landfall. We’ll organise healers for you.”

Hermione barely heard the battlecruiser’s reply. “Affirmative. Be aware that many of us were heavily damaged.”

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. “We’ll need all Aurors and Hit-Wizards here. Everyone who can cast a healing spell.” All the surviving wizards and witches - thanks to her monitoring the radio communication during the battle, she knew many of them had been killed in the battle. They had been braver than she had expected. A far cry from the Aurors she had met at the end and after the war. Standing up, she swayed a bit, then ground her teeth and started walking. “We’d best meet them at the pier.”

“Let’s fly,” Harry said, pulling his shrunk broom out.

She glared at him, but with her legs still shaking, there was not much she could say. “Let’s check if Narcissa is dead as well.”

Harry and Ron grimaced, but nodded - all of them had learned in the last war to make certain their enemies were dead before moving on.

The former Death Eater was dead. A few bones were all that was left in the pit, and they looked… warped. Unnatural. The Auror standing guard near the pit looked a bit green in the face, in Hermione’s opinion. For a moment she was tempted to grill him for details about the monster’s death. She shook her head instead. He deserved better than that. She pointed her wand at the remains, and levitated them up, then shrunk them. They were the only remains they had of the enemies - the rest had been sunk - and she wanted to find out all she could about them.
“That thing… what was it?” the Auror asked in a shaky voice.

“We don’t know exactly,” she said. “Some evil spirits of the deep sea, according to our allies. But without a thorough examination I cannot confirm that.” Diffusing the truth came easy to her these days. She had learned that some knowledge should not be made public. And the secrets of the shipgirls was part of that.

It would be best if the Aurors and Hit-Wizards who had fought in this battle were obliviated of their knowledge, to ensure no one would try to call up more shipgirls. Or those monsters like the Bismarck. She had proposed that, even. But Harry and Ron had opposed her idea. And, now, she had to admit that they had been correct. It wouldn’t be right to wipe the memory of this battle from those who had fought, and seen their comrades and friends fall. The dead, especially those who had fought bravely, should be remembered.

“Gather up your group, Peters, and head to the pier!” Ron ordered.

Harry meanwhile was talking into his mirror. “Potter to Brown… Brown? Ah. Elwes. Take your group and apparate as close to Azkaban as possible, then fly to the pier. We’ll meet you there.” He sighed. “Brown didn’t make it.”

Hermione hadn’t known the man so she nodded, hopefully sombrely enough. “Let’s go now.” Even with a Bubble-Head Charm, and the ashes gone, she thought she could smell the stench of burned flesh. Before she could take more than a few steps though, Ron picked her up, ignoring her protests, and sat her down on his broom. She hadn’t noticed him unshrinking it - she must be more tired than she thought. She’d have to rest a bit at the pier, until the fleet arrived.

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“Hermione, wake up! They’re here.”

She opened her eyes with a gasp. Had she really fallen asleep? She quickly studied her surroundings. She was at the pier, on the shore, on a… bed? She sent a glare at Harry, who had not just let her sleep, instead of letting her help organise the healers, but had to have conjured a bed for her, even!

“You’re not the only one who slept. Everyone needed to rest.” Which meant Harry and Ron probably hadn’t. She frowned, but he grinned, then grew serious, and nodded towards the pier. “Everything’s ready. Everyone’s ready.”

She sighed and stood up. “Alright,” she said, raising her voice so everyone present understood her. “They’ll start bleeding as soon as they step on land. Be ready to heal them! Who can cast diagnostic charms?”

She put those in command of the rest, splitting the witches and wizards into two groups. Hood was waiting near the pier, her rigging being repaired by Ron and Harry.

“Destroyers first,” the battlecruiser said. “They’re the most vulnerable.”

Hermione looked at the shipgirls in question. None of them looked as if they were over eighteen, but all of them stood straight. She knew the look in their eyes. They were veterans. Like herself. Two of their number were missing. Firedrake and Vampire. They had been lost. Sunk in battle. Hermes would be devastated, Hermione thought. Vampire had been her escort when they were sunk in the Indian Ocean. She couldn’t dwell on that though, there was work to do.

“Alright. Acasta, Ardent - come up. Be ready - this will hurt as soon as you step on land.”
The two destroyers nodded with a grim expression, but their steps didn’t falter when they dismissed their rigging and stepped on the pier. Then they screamed. Gashes and burns appeared on their bodies and their clothes were soaked with blood.

Hermione had expected it, but still flinched. She didn’t let that stop her from casting though. Wands rose, spells flashed, and the two girls were quickly taken care of, though they looked a bit shocked still, even when their wounds had disappeared, and quickly returned to the water, heading to Glorious.

Hermione looked at the remaining destroyers. A few of them were flinching now. She picked those for the next batch. It was better for them to get it over with, instead watching more of them suffer while being healed.

And they would be healed, all of them, even if she and everyone else had to exhaust themselves. Britain owed the shipgirls too much.

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North Sea, Azkaban, May 11th, 2001

Harry Potter watched the last shipgirl to be healed step off the pier and land in the water. It was Hood, of course - the battlecruiser had refused to be healed until everyone else had been taken care of. A stance Harry approved of, although Ron and Hermione disagreed.

The fleet of shipgirls was assembled near the pier, with the capital ships gathered in the centre of a screen of destroyers. Above them flew Glorious’s combat air patrol - the carrier didn’t want to take any chance of another warship sneaking up on the fleet, or so she claimed.

On the pier, the exhausted survivors of the Ministry forces rested. Of the dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards that had flown into battle with Ron and Harry, half had been killed. The pickets had not lost anyone storming the island with them, but that didn’t lessen their courage.

“They can’t wait to get back on the water,” Ron said, snorting. “And they are as good as new, as Hood said.” He stifled a yawn, then glanced at the wizards and witches, before whispering: “We don’t have much time left. We’ll need to act now.”

Harry nodded. The thought of others calling up shipgirls, summoning them with necromancy and human sacrifices, was chilling. Even if Hermione hadn’t gone to great length telling them about the danger all those ships sunk in the Second World War, often fighting for a despicable enemy, represented, then Tromso would have convinced Harry of the necessity of keeping shipgirls a secret.

He looked at Hermione and nodded.

His friend stood up, still tired, close to exhausted, but Harry knew better than to point this out - she was determined to go through with it.

The three wandered on the path leading up to the prison until they were out of sight of the Ministry’s forces. “So…” Harry said, drawing his wand.

“I’ll be the Secret Keeper,” Hermione said, her tone making it clear she considered this non-negotiable.

Harry and Ron exchanged grins. “We’d not dream of picking someone else, Hermione,” Ron said. “I’ll keep watch.”

“What?” The witch looked confused for a moment. “Oh… I see.”
“You’re the best choice, Hermione. You are already keeping the secrets of your Department,” Harry said. And she wasn’t quite as prone to risking her life as Harry and Ron were - and would be even less so with this new responsibility. At least Harry and Ron hoped so.

She must have realised that as well, since she was frowning, but she nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Harry raised his wand. Dumbledore had once intended for them to hide the secret of Voldemort’s Horcruxes with this spell, but they hadn’t needed to, in the end. This, however, was different. No one could know how to summon shipgirls.

He started casting the Fidelius Charm.

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“What did you do, Mister Potter?”

For a woman whose country and Ministry had just been saved, Hyacinth Selwyn, acting Minister for Magic, sounded rather annoyed.

Harry Potter had expected that. As had his friends, which was the reason they were not here. He smiled politely at the witch. “We defeated the enemy threatening the Ministry and the Statute of Secrecy. Wizarding Britain is safe once more, ma’am.”

“Not that!” She almost snarled. “What did you do with your so-called ‘allies’ - those creatures that, as the surviving Aurors tell me, fought and killed the enemy.”

Harry spread his hands. “I didn’t do anything with them, ma’am. They’re our allies, not our subordinates.”

“They’re unknown magical creatures. And of British origin according to those who saw and spoke to them. That makes them a concern for the Ministry.”

Harry smiled. “There is no reason to be concerned, ma’am. Unspeakable Granger is handling the matter.”

“Granger!” Selwyn stood up, but since she was rather short, it didn’t look very intimidating. Not that Harry would have been intimidated by the witch in any case - he had stood up to Voldemort too often to be impressed by the likes of the acting Minister. “That’s not her call to make!”

“On the contrary, ma’am, it is.” Harry smiled.

“What?” Selwyn stared at him. “What are you insinuating?”

Dawlish, standing to her side, seemed to be hiding a smile, or so Harry thought - the man was an opportunist. He made a show of sighing. “As I told you before: There are matters that fall under the sole purview of the Department of Mysteries and which I cannot reveal without explicit permission from the Head of the Department.”

“Her department is part of the Ministry, which answers to me.”

“You’ll have to talk to her about this, ma’am.” Harry shrugged.

“And where is she?” Selwyn was snarling now.
“Resting.” At Grimmauld Place, together with the shipgirls, to be exact.

“This is an outrage!” Selwyn gesticulated wildly. “Unknown but dangerous magical creatures are on the loose in Britain, and you refuse to inform me!”

“Yes, ma’am.” Harry looked into her eyes. “We’re handling the matter, as I told you.”

“You…” she hissed.

“They are our friends.” Harry grinned. Neither he and his friends nor the shipgirls themselves were quite certain yet what they’d do, with the Bismarck and her fleet gone, but all of them agreed that it wouldn’t involve the Ministry having any say.

Selwyn actually paled when she understood what he hadn’t said, but instead hinted at. She was breathing heavily. She sat down, trembling, and shook her head. “Get out!”

Harry nodded at her, and left the office.

Dawlish followed him out. “She’s very stressed.”

“Yes. Even though the crisis is over now,” Harry said.

“Maybe she should retire.”

Harry glanced at the other wizard. “As I understand it, she is just a temporary replacement until a new Minister is elected.”

“Yes.” Dawlish nodded.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “You wouldn’t be planning to run for Minister?” It wouldn’t be the first time a Head Auror had been elected.

“I’d need more support than I currently have.” Dawlish smiled. “But given the rest of the candidates, I think I would do a better job. None of them have been Aurors. They don’t understand the price people pay for some policies.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Harry didn’t have a high opinion of Dawlish. The man was an idiot, but so were most Ministry employees. But he had an even worse opinion of the other candidates. And Dawlish was unlikely to outmaneuver them.

He’d have to talk this through with Ron and Hermione. And probably Arthur.

Having a Minister for Magic in your pocket would very useful.

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Thames Estuary, Britain, May 11th, 2001

HMS Hood was in a mixed mood while she led her fleet back towards Britain’s shores. She was elated that they had beaten the Bismarck, and the enemy fleet. And Voldemort had been killed for good, according to Harry, Hermione and Ron. They had done their duty for England. Once more an invasion force had been shattered, and Britain kept safe. Hood felt proud to have kept up the tradition of the Royal Navy.

But the victory had not been without cost. Vampire and Firedrake had been sunk. Granted, the losses had been far less than she had feared or expected, but still - two of her comrades, gone. All the
destroyers mourned their two sisters, but they were used to such losses - escorts were, to some degree at least, expendable. They would get over it. Hermes, though, had taken the loss of Vampire especially badly. She had been the carrier’s escort, in her last battle, where both had been sunk. To lose her now… Hood would need to talk with Hermes. And maybe with Glorious as well - that carrier wasn’t letting Acasta and Ardent out of her sight, and would probably keep planes tailing them should they be detached on a mission.

Behind her, Prince of Wales and Repulse sailed close together. Or rather, Repulse was sticking with Prince of Wales. Hood felt a bit torn about that. Maybe she was even jealous - Prince of Wales had been with her when they had hunted the Bismarck for the first time. Another thing they would have to sort out. A commander’s duty was never over. At least everyone was fully operational again, hulls, rigging and bodies. Magic was wonderful!

Though magic was also dangerous, Hood knew. Apparently, shipgirls were not as invulnerable to spells and curses as she had thought after the experiments with Hermione - the witch had burned that light cruiser to death, on land, with cursed fire. The battlecruiser shuddered at the thought. Another reason to stay on water- The sea was a ship’s friend.

But those were ultimately minor concerns. There was one far more important question to answer: What would her fleet be doing in the future? They were called back to defend Britain against an enemy only they could fight, and they had been victorious. What purpose did they have now? Warships had duties in peacetime as well - showing the flag, patrolling the sea lanes, search and rescue, even diplomacy. Hood was very familiar with such duties.

But they were not ships any more, not truly, were they? They were shipgirls. Spirits, souls of warships given a human form by magic. They couldn’t be part of the Royal Navy like this. And if they were normal ships, they would be decommissioned and wrecked anyway - although some of them might be turned into museum ships this time around. Hood shuddered at the number of her friends who had ended scrapped, discarded like rubbish despite their faithful service. Warspite at least had beached herself when she had torn free from the tug towing her to the breakers. A fitting gesture of defiance for the old lady.

But from what Hood had heard and overheard, the Ministry wouldn’t be a good place for her fleet either. They were wizards, not the Admiralty. They didn’t know anything about ships. And, she added with a grim expression, they didn’t seem to be trustworthy. At least that was the impression Harry, Hermione and Ron had given her.

She sighed, closing her eyes for just a moment. A ship, a shipgirl, needed a purpose. Her friends were still adjusting to their new existence, dealing with the battle they had been through, the victory they had won, and the losses they had suffered. But sooner or later, Hood would have to address this issue.

And she didn’t know how. Yet.

*****

London, No. 10 Downing Street, May 11th, 2001

“Yes, sir. The enemy fleet and its leader have been completely destroyed. The Bismarck has been sunk,” Ron Weasley said, meeting the Prime Minister’s eyes.

The man didn’t look that reassured. “There won’t be a repeat of Tromso?”

“We’ve taken measures to prevent further such creatures from being called or summoned,” Ron said.
“We are confident we have dealt with the source of the problem.” He smiled, trying not to show how tired he was.

“What’s the status of the Hood and the other Royal Navy shipgirls?” the Minister asked.

“Two destroyers were lost. The rest survived, although all suffered some damage in the battle, but for the carriers. They are on the way to full recovery though.” Physically, they already had recovered, but psychologically… Hermes had taken the loss of Vampire badly, and Glorious was still keeping up a combat air patrol as often as she could.

The Minister nodded. “We’ve been preparing a press release, stating that the terrorists responsible for the attacks on London and Tromso were intercepted in the North Sea and their ship sunk when they did not surrender.” The Prime Minister turned to Ron’s father, who had been watching the scene so far without comment. “We will be needing some help from you to make it look convincing. At least convincing enough to make those who doubt it look like conspiracy theorists. Our allies have been informed, and their intelligence services will suppress the truth as well.”

Arthur Weasley nodded. “The Ministry will provide all the help we can.”

Ron wondered if his father knew what conspiracy theorists were, then felt bad about the thought - his dad was not quite as naive as he sometimes acted. And the Ministry’s Obliviators would be able to provide the needed ‘proof’ for the muggles.

“But that leaves us with the question of the future status of the shipgirls.” The Prime Minister folded his hands on his desk. “What will they do, now that the enemy they were called back for to fight has been defeated? Will they vanish once more?”

Ron shook his head. “Our expert thinks that they will not vanish, but stay, based on the ritual that called them. We don’t know enough about them yet to make any other predictions at this time.”

“Will the Ministry of Magic be handling this matter?”

Ron was not quite certain, but he thought the Prime Minister was tenser than his expression and tone showed. He shook his head. “Not directly. It’s a matter for the Department of Mysteries.” Hermione would be quite busy fending off Horrible Hyacinth’s attempts to gain control over the shipgirls, but people like the acting Minister for Magic could not be trusted with such power. “The shipgirls consider themselves ships of the Royal Navy. They remember their past life as warships in the Second World War, fighting for Britain.” Ron didn’t think they saw themselves as magical creatures, and doubted they’d submit to the Ministry, should they try to push the issue - no matter how brave the Aurors and Hit-Wizards fighting at their side had been.

“I see.” The Prime Minister nodded. “Do they wish to join the Royal Navy?”

“They know they cannot join the muggle navy, sir. Not with the Statute of Secrecy in effect,” Ron said. The Prime Minister would know that as well. “They just fought a battle. Most of them haven’t been around for more than a day. They need time to adjust before they can make decisions about their future.” And it would be them deciding what they would do. Not anyone else.

“Of course.” The Prime Minister smiled. “Given their service to the country, I believe the Queen would like to meet them though, and honour their courage, in private at least.”

Ron wasn’t certain if the Queen knew about her intention yet, but there was no way he could turn this down - the shipgirls would jump at the chance to meet the Queen. So he nodded. “We’ll inform them, sir.”
The rest of the meeting was more talk about the battle, and the cover-up the muggles would be doing. From what Ron understood, they counted on the cover story not holding up to close scrutiny, but would be planting so many slightly more plausible rumours, the truth would be dismissed as too fantastic by all but the most paranoid people. At least that was the plan.

Before he could leave for Grimmauld Place though, his father held him back.

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London, City of Westminster, May 11th, 2001

“The Ministry’s not certain how much they’ll release to the public. Magical creatures with that kind of power, outside the control of the Ministry - there would be panic in the streets if that was known.”

They had barely ordered a pint each before Ron’s father came to the point. Arthur Weasley looked tired and rather tense for a wizard who had just heard that his country was safe again, but he had been a Gryffindor, after all.

“They can’t keep this hidden. A dozen Aurors and Hit-Wizards know first-hand what shipgirls can do,” Ron said. “I’d not be surprised if the Prophet had a headline about them tomorrow. And Luna will likely run a series of articles about them.”

His dad winced. “That could be problematic.”

Ron shrugged. “You know that the Ministry having control over the shipgirls would be far, far worse. The idiots in the Wizengamot and the Ministry would probably start a war, drunk with that power. Unless the shipgirls don’t go to war first, when their heavy-handed stupidity grows unbearable.” Which, in Ron’s opinion, wouldn’t take longer than a week, at most.

“Are you counting on that, Ron?”

Ron blinked. “What?”

“Some people are worried that you - Harry, Hermione and yourself - are planning to use the chaos this can cause to take over the Ministry.” Arthur smiled apologetically.

Ron snorted. “We don’t want to take over the Ministry. We simply want to ensure that it won’t present a danger to us, our families and our friends, or others, ever again. That’s why Hermione took over the Department of Mysteries, and purged most of the Unspeakables. That’s why Harry and I hunted down the remaining Death Eaters.”

“Will you claim you control the shipgirls then?”

Yes, Ron’s dad was certainly not as naive as many thought. Ron smiled wryly. “We’ll not claim to control them. But Luna knows that the shipgirls are our friends.” Which would go into her next article.

“I see.” Arthur’s smile matched Ron’s.

The waitress arrived with their two pints, and the two wizards took sips in silence. It wasn’t a bad ale, Ron thought, but nothing special either.

“You mentioned your families, Ron,” Arthur broke the silence after a while.

“Yes, I did.” Ron stared at his dad. “Just because you don’t like our relationship doesn’t mean you
stop being family.”

Arthur sighed. “It’s not about your relationship. It never was.” Ron raised his eyebrows at him, and he added: “Or it was never just about that.” His father sighed. “It was the secrets, the way you changed, isolated yourself, cut us off…”

Ron didn’t want to argue, but he couldn’t let that stand. “You know why we acted as we did. You didn’t believe us. We did what we had to.”

“Yes. And Molly hasn’t forgiven herself for not being there for you. For not believing you.” His dad sighed again. “She’s been as worried as in the last war, these days. Knowing that you three would be fighting again…”

Ron winced. He knew his mum. “I’m sorry, but there was no choice. No one else could have done what we did.”

“Would you have let someone else do it, if there had been a choice?”

Ron took a sip from his ale instead of answering.

His father shook his balding head, sighing. “Of course you wouldn’t. Gryffindors, the lot of us.”

“Yes.” Ron nodded.

“There will be another family dinner. Tomorrow evening.”

“It would be best to hold it at Grimmauld Place,” Ron said. “We have a lot of guests we’d rather not leave alone.”

Arthur blinked. “Oh. I see. Molly will want to cook though.”

“Harry will probably be too busy at the Ministry anyway.” Ron shrugged. His friend was a bit protective of his kitchen, but Molly knew her way around it. She had cooked there for the Order during their fifth year, after all.

“Ah.” Arthur cleared his throat. “I, err, was wondering… are you three involved with Hood?”

Ron stared at his dad. “No.” And if they were, then it wouldn’t be anyone’s business but their own.

“Ah. good. Molly’s been coming around, about your relationship. She’s been talking about how you three were inseparable while at Hogwarts. How she should have seen it coming.”

“Ah.” That sounded like Mum, Ron thought.

“So… we’ll see you tomorrow then. I’ll tell Molly.”

“And I’ll tell Harry and Hermione.”

It would be good to have normal family dinners again, Ron thought. Even if they tended to be quite lively.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 11th, 2001

Hermione Granger felt slightly guilty at letting Harry and Ron handle the Ministry and the muggle
government, despite being a department head herself. But she was tired - not quite exhausted, despite what her friends thought - and she feared that if Selwyn was her usual annoying self, Hermione would hex the old witch into a puddle. And someone had to take care of the shipgirls. She wasn’t looking forward to casting the Doubling Charm a few dozen times. Maybe she should simply cast the Gemino Curse variant. Grinning, she imagined burying the kitchen in food, and letting the shipgirls eat their way through it. Harry would have kittens at seeing his kitchen defiled like that, but then, she could probably clean it up before he was home, even if calling her parents and informing them that the danger was over - they had been going spare after the attack on Tromso - had delayed her return to the house for a bit. Although it might also have helped mend some fences.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a glaring, pouting blonde witch. And her remaining guilt evaporated - her boys had left her to handle Luna!

“Hermione!”

“Hello, Luna.” Hermione steeled herself. “We won.”

“Of course you did! And you’ll tell me everything - later.” Luna huffed and drew her wand, stalking towards her. A few flicks later - her diagnostic charms had improved, Hermione noted - the blonde frowned. “You exhausted yourself! You’re running on Pepper-Up potions!”

“I just took one,” Hermione said.

“You should know better!”

“Someone has to look after the shipgirls,” Hermione defended herself. “They need a lot of food.”

“I can do that!” Luna’s pout deepened. She was apparently still mad about them making her promise not to join the battle - the blonde was a brave and skilled witch, but she was not quite the flyer Ron and Harry were, and Azkaban… Luna’s nightmares had been bad enough after the first time she had ventured there, with the forces retaking it after Voldemort had fallen. The blonde had been their best expert on Dementors, but Hermione would rather see the island nuked than let Luna visit again after seeing the nightmares that trip had caused her friend to suffer through.

Feeling guilty, she nodded. “Alright, you win. I’ll go rest, and you can feed the shipgirls.”

“Yay!” Luna hugged her.

“And you can glare at Harry and Ron, once they return - they are not resting either,” Hermione said.

“Will do!” The blonde nodded enthusiastically.

Hermione considered making Luna promise that she wouldn’t just duplicate pudding, ice cream and cake, but decided against it. The shipgirls had certainly earned it.

And it would keep Luna busy and happy. Something Hermione and her friends considered quite important.

******


Hermione Granger entered the Ministry’s restored atrium at a brisk pace, early in the morning. She had to check up on her department, and deal with the work that had piled up over the last few days. She couldn’t delegate too much, unfortunately - a number of things were just too dangerous to trust
others with. Not even to her handpicked Unspeakables.

She did notice that the guards at the entrance seemed twitchier than usual, and that a lot of the employes were staring at her, even whispering to each other once she had walked past. It was almost as bad as after Voldemort’s defeat.

The young witch sniffed. This time, there wouldn’t be a purge, so there was no need for the Ministry employees to be afraid of her and her friends. Or there shouldn’t be - she knew a number of people resented her, both for cleaning out the Department of Mysteries of pureblood bigots with the morals and ethics of mad Nazi scientists, and for being installed as the Head of the Department of Mysteries as a muggleborn witch, and a muggleborn witch who had not even taken her N.E.W.T.s to boot!

She could have taken the exams any time since then, but she hadn’t cared enough to - she had long since realised that her grades would not have helped her much, not in the old Ministry, where blood had counted far more than talent. And not in the new Ministry either - she relied on her, if she did say so herself, obvious talent. And, she added to herself, her and her friends’ power.

She stepped up to the lifts, and hid a grin when the crowd parted for her. It was petty, but she liked this. It was far easier to deal with bureaucrats if they were afraid of her. Hopefully, this time it would last longer, but she hadn’t that much faith in her co-workers - Ministry employees, especially the older, pureblood ones, didn’t tend to have good memories. Although the Bismarck’s attack had shaken Wizarding Britain up, so maybe she wouldn’t have to waste as much time dealing with power plays. Hopefully.

The lift arrived, and she entered. A few younger witches and wizards joined her. They kept their distance, but they didn’t look afraid of her. Though Hermione wasn’t quite certain that she liked the way they seemed awed any more.

She recognised a few of them - they had been at Hogwarts with her, if not in her year or dorm. “Hello, Mister Carter, Miss Smith.” Hermione nodded at them. They would have been at Hogwarts during the battle as well.

“Ah… hello,” Smith managed to say. Carter just nodded.

Hermione considered making an attempt at small talk, but decided against it. Ron was the one who was good at that. Fortunately, they left the lift at the next floor, before the silence became awkward.

She felt some of her tension leave when she entered the Department of Mysteries. Her department. She had been molding it for years. It wasn’t quite home, of course, but it was hers. “Good morning, Jonathan,” she greeted the wizard at the entrance.

Jonathan Meyer smiled at her. “Hail the conquering hero!”

She snorted at his joke. “We did what we needed to.” Since no one else was around, she added: “How did the Department hold up without me?”

“As usual, ma’am,” the wizard said. “Richard pulled an all-nighter, and Baker and Ellis had another row in the break room.”

“I see.” So, things were back to normal, at least in her domain.

“People are curious about the ‘allies’ we’ve heard about,” Jonathan said.

She laughed. “They’ll have to be a bit more patient. I’m not about to let them poke my new friends until they have settled in. They’re a bit twitchy after the battle.” She didn’t want to find out how
Hood would react to Richard trying to examine her - the wizard had no tact at all, and rarely bothered to explain what he was doing. She grew serious and stared at Jonathan. “Anything concerning them is not to be shared with others.” Everyone would receive a memo, of course, but Jonathan would be more effective at making the rest of her crew understand that she meant it.

“Of course, ma’am.”

She smiled, and continued towards her office. Entering it, she sealed the door and cast a series of detection spells to check for intruders as well as eavesdropping spells and devices. Voldemort’s soul was no longer sealed in her hidden vault, but she wasn’t about to suddenly change her routine. She had other secrets to protect as well. Like the shipgirls’.

She sat down and glanced at the picture on her desk, the one taken of Harry, Ron and herself, waving and smiling, in 1994. Seven years ago.

It was time to add another picture, she decided. A current one.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 12th, 2001

Harry Potter generally liked cooking. It was simple, safe, and relaxing. And there was no pressure - Hermione couldn’t cook and wouldn’t complain about his cooking as long as it was edible, Ron wasn’t a picky eater to begin with, and Luna… as long as their blonde friend had a wide selection of seasonings to spice up their food - a very wide one - she was happy.

Today though, cooking was a challenge. Molly Weasley had taken up residence in Harry’s kitchen, and was preparing a feast for their ‘victory dinner’, as it had been dubbed by people other than Harry. And he had to work hard just trying to keep up with Ron’s mum. Molly could have been a professional chef - still could, Harry thought - and she had the attitude and work ethic to match. All around her, spice jars and bottles floated, dipping seemingly randomly over pots and pans while floating knives filleted the fish for the first course.

“Harry, could you tell me where the pickled vegetables are?”

“Ah… they should be in the pantry,” Harry said, washing the salad.

“There aren’t any there.”

“But I restocked just last wee…” Harry trailed off, sighing, when he remembered that Luna had been back for a few days. He didn’t exactly know what she was doing with the pickles - he suspected she wasn’t eating them - but they vanished at a rapid rate whenever the blonde visited. “I’ll go buy some.”

“Don’t take too long, Harry!” Molly said, flicking her wand.

Harry nodded even as he saw how the different pots and pans were readjusted, to take the delay into account. For a moment, he was tempted to send Ron to buy the pickled vegetables, and stay and simply watch. But he decided against it - a short trip would be relaxing. “It’s just a quick trip, Molly,” he answered.

She laughed. “A trip in a country you just saved again. You might want to take your cloak, to avoid getting mobbed by well-wishers.” Her smile was open, warm and honest.

It was a far cry from how things had been at that dinner at the Weasleys, a few weeks after the
Burrow had been rebuilt.

*****

“Ron! And Harry and Hermione! Come inside!” Molly’s welcoming smile looked a bit strained to Harry, and when he glanced to his friends, Ron was wincing and Hermione was pressing her lips together into a thin line, an expression he knew meant she was barely hiding her annoyance.

Molly vanished into the kitchen, citing the need to observe the roast, and they entered the new living room, where they saw Arthur get up - and fold the latest issue of the Daily Prophet to stick down the side of the couch. That explained it. Harry knew they should have been expecting that. They had talked about it, but he had still hoped it wouldn’t be quite that awkward.

“Come, sit down,” Arthur said, waving at the other seats.

Harry wasn’t certain, but he thought the wizard looked somewhat nervous too. There were three seats for them, and he was about to sit down in one of them when Hermione flicked her wand, and turned them into one couch. Large enough for all three of them. Her glance towards Harry made it clear she’d not budge on this, and so they sat down, with Hermione in the middle.

Arthur visibly swallowed. Things were going well indeed, Harry thought.

“I’ve heard you’ve accepted positions in the Ministry,” the older wizard said. “In the Auror Corps and in the Department of Mysteries. Congratulations.” With a still slightly strained smile, he added: “Molly was ecstatic when she heard.”

Hermione smiled thinly. “I’ll be rebuilding the Department of Mysteries. Most of the current staff will either be sent to Azkaban, or executed after their trials are done. Those still alive, at least.” The witch shook her head. “The things we found in there… they made Malfoy Manor’s basement look like the Hufflepuff’s first year dorm. But we’ll be colleagues, both Department Heads.”

Arthur stared. Some things apparently hadn’t been talked about that much. Or no one had wanted to talk to him about this, out of fear of the news reaching Harry and his friends. “Kingsley has been talking about a promotion, but he said it wasn’t certain yet.”

“I doubt the Wizengamot - what’s left of it - will object,” Ron said, snorting. “They were spooked right proper after we dealt with the Unspeakables.”

His father winced, but nodded. “Still, the same was said after the first war. And you know how that turned out.”

“That’s why we’ll make certain that things will not be repeated this time around,” Harry said. “We’ll hunt down every last supporter of Voldemort. It’s why we’ve become Aurors.” The real reason was that Kingsley wanted them to do this officially, so he’d at least look as if he was in control.

Ron nodded. “We’re skipping the academy though. We’re going straight into the Auror Corps.”

“Ah. Are you certain that this is wise, though?” Arthur looked concerned. “That often breeds resentment, and you might be missing some training needed for your work.”

Ron shrugged. “We can hunt down dark wizards and other scum just fine. We did catch more Death Eaters than the Aurors combined, last count.”

They hadn’t really bothered with catching most of them alive, which had made things easier, of
course, but that wasn’t a topic for this conversation either.

“We want to use our current influence and reputation to set things right in the Ministry,” Hermione said. “Before people start to forget what happened.”

“No one will ever forget what you did for us,” Arthur said.

Harry snorted. “They already did, once.” He pointed at the folded newspaper. “And they are already starting to, again.”

“I should have squashed that bug,” he heard Hermione mumbling. They had discussed dealing with Skeeter, after she had written an article speculating about their involvement in Lucius Malfoy’s death, but had decided against it. And now, if anything happened to the muckraker, then they’d be the prime suspects, and their plans would suffer even more.

Arthur glanced at the newspaper. “Ah… Rita was quite…” He winced, then added: “…her usual self.”

Harry snorted. They waited, but Arthur didn’t ask if what the article had stated about their relationship was true. Not even when they were staring at him, daring him to ask.

And then Ginny arrived, waving the Daily Prophet as if it was a battle flag, before slapping it down on the table in the living room so hard, the pictures of Harry, Hermione and Ron on the front page were sent reeling in their frames. “What is this?” she yelled. “They say you are… all three of you… Merlin’s arse! I’ll dunk Skeeter in honey and leave her to Luna’s Flesh-Eating Fire Ants!”

Then she noticed their seating arrangement. How close they sat to each other. Harry and Ron leaning into Hermione. Thighs touching. And she gaped, her mouth opening and closing without a sound coming out.

The tirade which had followed had set a new record even for the Burrow. Things had been said, or rather yelled, by Ginny and Molly while Arthur kept out of the way, though not speaking up for the trio either, and it had taken a year for the family dinners to include Harry and his friends again - and no one raised the topic of their relationship again.

*****

Harry shook his head as the memories of that dinner faded. Things had changed. Fences had been mended, even if it had taken another war to completely get past the awkwardness that still lingered. But that was, in a way, typical for the Weasleys - When push came to shove, family closed ranks.

On the way towards the fireplace in the entrance hall, he found Sikh and Cossack talking to a portrait in the hallway. Or listening, to be precise. Hieronymus Black apparently had been an active sailor in the 16th century, during the conflict with Spain, and was spinning an enthralling tale. And flirting shamelessly with the two women while claiming that he had always known ships had souls and were magical.

Hermione was at work and, apart from Molly, the rest of the family hadn’t yet arrived. Ron had left with Glorious and Acasta and Ardent for the Thames Estuary again, where the carrier was running a combat air patrol. She had claimed it was to keep in practice, and to search for enemies that might have escaped, but Harry doubted that that was all there was to it. Hood would handle it though, or so he hoped. The rest of the shipgirls were either sleeping or poking around the house. Or in the living room, chatting with Luna, who was recording their histories for The Quibbler.

His family had grown, Harry realised with a smile, while stepping into the fireplace.
London, Diagon Alley, May 12th, 2001

Harry Potter read the Daily Prophet’s lead article as he waited for his turn at the grocer in Diagon Alley - Luna also insisted on magical pickled vegetables, claiming muggle ones were unsuitable for whatever she needed them for. It was full of praise, mostly for him and his friends and their ‘mysterious allies’ - a blatant hint at Hermione’s department - and very short on information. But there was no dig at their relationship, nor any veiled scorn at their past. Harry kept re-reading it, mostly to use the newspaper to hide behind - Molly had been right; he had been mobbed in the Leaky Cauldron, almost as badly as when Hagrid had taken him there for the first time, ten years ago.

Their renewed fame would be a great help for their plans for further reforms in Wizarding Britain, but currently, it made shopping quite an adventure, Harry thought. Or an annoyance. He couldn’t help but feel slightly resentful that all those who were now showering him with praise and gratitude would have, until recently, clucked their tongues at the ‘sordid tale’ of his relationship with his friends.

His turn came, and he lowered his newspaper as he stepped up to the counter. “I’ll need the usual range of pickled vegetables.”

The vendor’s eyes went wide. “Mister Potter! What an honour!”

The man’s voice carried through the whole shop, and a dozen people made a beeline for the young wizard, their voices rising as everyone tried to make themselves heard over everyone else.

Harry forced himself to smile, facing another ten minutes of being mobbed. Hopefully, the clerk would prepare his usual order in the meantime. An annoyance, to be certain - but far better than the alternative.

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London, No. 12 Grimmauld Place, May 12th, 2001

“How excellent a meal, Mrs Weasley,” HMS Hood said, inclining her head at the older witch at the table. The shipgirls at the table, busy stuffing themselves, vocally agreed. Or made loud agreeing noises, in the case of several destroyers who apparently couldn’t be bothered to swallow and pause for a moment to thank their hosts properly. It truly was an outstanding meal - far better than the dishes served to flag officers on her decks in the past, Hood thought.

Far less formal, though, as well - her fellow warships, with the exception of the destroyers who had not been used to such occasions, had been surprised, if not shocked at that, the battlecruiser knew. Seeing what they had come to see as commanding officers - although from another branch of the Military - being berated by a tiny slip of a girl for never writing enough, hugs being exchanged all around, tears appearing in several eyes… that would take some time to get used to.

But they would get used to it, Hood knew. Of course, they wouldn’t go quite that far - discipline and military bearing were the backbone of the Navy, after all. But Hood wanted her fleet to be a family as well, not just a formation. She wanted to experience the same warmth and intimacy the wizards and witches at the table showed to each other. And, to her surprise, to the fleet as well - Mrs Weasley had all but adopted the destroyers, and was making headway with the carriers.

She would have made headway with Prince of Wales and Repulse as well, but those two… Hood
sighed. If only Repulse was not so jealous and clingy - Prince of Wales had been her partner, and she hadn’t died on Hood’s watch! Unfortunately, Hood was the commanding officer of the fleet. The flagship too. She couldn’t use - abuse - her power to settle things. Maybe she should ask Harry how he had managed to settle his relationships.

There were more important matters to consider anyway, she thought, holding her plate up for another magical refill. The future of her fleet being the most important one. Things apparently were changing at the Ministry, but the thought of being under the command of politicians, be they wizards and witches or not, with no military experience, and especially no naval experience, was not a comforting one.

Although, she added to herself, looking at Harry, Hermione, and Ron talking with Luna and Cossack, there were wizards and witches Hood and her fleet trusted. Veterans who knew the price of war, and would not risk it for petty reasons, yet would not shy away from it either when it was needed.

She’d have to talk to them later. For now, she had a victory dinner to enjoy. And a battleship to court.

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Atlantic Ocean, Denmark Strait, July 26th, 2001

Her last surviving crewman was old, HMS Hood noticed when she saw him standing on the quarterdeck of the Northern Horizon. Sixty years since her sinking had left their traces. And yet he stood straight as he pushed the button that would release a memorial plaque containing the honour rolls of her crew at the bow of her wreck.

Her wreck. It felt very strange, to be on board another ship, floating above her own remains, Hood thought. Uncomfortable too - sailing over her own grave. But at the same time it felt good to see herself and her crew remembered. Cared for. And to see her last sailor, alive, honouring her.

She longed to step forward, reveal herself. But she couldn’t. She wasn’t even supposed to be there - she had slipped on the ship with the help of Harry, invisible, just an hour ago. A stowaway battlecruiser, she thought snorting.

The crewmember in front of her, watching the memorial service, must have heard her, since he turned around, frowning when he couldn’t spot anyone. She slipped away, silently, to another spot from where she could observe the service, and honour her crew. She didn’t want to see her wreck though, that would have been too much, so she avoided glancing at the TV monitors. Anyway, what mattered was her crew, both living and dead.

She closed her eyes as the service continued, remembering the battle, her sinking, and her crew’s death, as tears ran down her cheeks. So many had gone down with her. So few had survived, and now only one man was left.

She saw him standing at the rail, staring out at the water, after the service had ended. He remembered as well, she realised. Hood moved next to him. She simply had to. He couldn’t see her, of course - she was still invisible. He was talking, she realised. To her, and to her crew.

“Thank you.”

Her whispered words slipped out before she noticed she was talking. She saw him jerk, surprised - the crew had given him space. But unlike the other man, he didn’t frown when he couldn’t see her.
He smiled instead, and nodded.

Hood saluted him, then put her hand on his shoulder. This time he did jerk, his eyes widening. She withdrew her hand slowly, whispered once more “Thank you”, then slipped away.

A long trip home awaited her.

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Epilogue: Rule, Britannia!

Mediterranean Sea, North of Algiers, Algeria June 21st, 2003

Ron Weasley sat on his broom and watched as the shipgirls who had just dropped into the sea below him took up formation. With his enchanted glasses he had no trouble making them out despite the dim light from the stars. Hood had called the force the ‘Mediterranean Squadron’, though it would not stay long in those waters. The battlecruiser was in the centre, flanked by Repulse and Prince of Wales. Glorious was a bit behind them, already launching planes, while Sikh and Cossack raced ahead, towards the Algerian coast, and Acasta and Ardent guarded the capital ships. Shipgirls.

A pair of Sea Gladiators zipped by, waggling their wings at him, and Ron waved back. He glanced to his side, where his brother Bill and his sister-in-law Fleur were astride their brooms. Both seemed to be gaping - it was the first time they’d seen the shipgirls in action, so to speak. It would have been funny, if not for the reason for this deployment.

A week ago, Gabrielle Delacour had been kidnapped during a trip to the Cote d’Azur by raiders from the Barbary Coast - rogue elements, according to the Magical Regency of Algiers. No one really believed the fiction though - the Dey of Algiers was too quick to offer his help in arranging a ransom, and this hadn’t been the first such raid.

If things went well though, then it would be the last. Dawlish had jumped at the chance to do something about the ‘Barbary Coast problem’, as the diplomats used to call the slave raids from the magical enclaves of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The Minister for Magic had been quick to offer Britain’s help to Magical France and even quicker to authorise this operation, when Ron, Harry and Hermione had informed him of the kidnapping and their plans. Dawlish knew just how popular they still were among the public, and he also knew that they’d have gone ahead with or without his authorisation - Gabrielle was family, and family stuck together. The Weasleys knew that better than anyone else.

Ron snorted, remembering the reaction of the rest of his siblings when he, Harry and Hermione had told them they couldn’t come along - as close as they once again were, he knew that the other Weasleys were not quite in shape for such missions. At least Luna was still in the Amazon, on another expedition. The blonde would have wanted to come along too, and Ron and his friends would have had a hard time refusing her.

The shipgirls, of course, had all volunteered as well. The Royal Navy had bombarded Algiers in the past to stop their pirating and slaving, and all of them were eager to help history repeat itself in this particular case.

Ron touched the communication mirror stuck to his collar. “Strike force to Recon: Squadron deployed.”

“Recon to Strike force: Landing site is clear.” Harry had gone ahead on his broom while the shipgirls were dropping in, to check on the landing site they had scouted out two days ago. His report meant that there were no muggles present along the route to Magical Algiers.

“Alright. We’re moving in.”

“Mediterranean Squadron is moving to cover the landing,” Hood said.
Ron leaned forward on his broom and started to fly towards the coast, followed by the rest of the strike force - Hermione, Bill, Fleur, and half a dozen volunteers from the Auror Corps and the Hit-Wizards. Almost all of them were veterans of the Battle of Azkaban - or, as the shipgirls called it, the Second Battle of Dogger Bank.

They didn’t take long to reach the coast - Hermione’s portkey had been right on the mark - and soon landed in the small cove Ron and Harry had discovered a day ago.

“The shipgirls will take a bit longer,” Ron said, mostly to Bill and Fleur; the rest knew how fast their friends were. He shrunk his broom.

“Alright,” Harry said, “This is our first extraction point. Be ready to apparate back here once we are done, or if you get separated from your group.” He laid a map out on a conjured table. “The Dey’s palace is in the centre of the town. We’ll move up the hill here, where we have a line of sight to it.”

Ron went past Harry, to watch their surroundings - he already knew the map by heart. Hermione followed him, covering the other side. She had studied their memories in their Pensieve.

He didn’t spot anyone, muggle or wizards. He touched his mirror again. “Path up the hill is clear. Hood, what’s your status?”

“We’ll be in position in ten minutes.” The battlecruiser’s tone was crisp and controlled, as usual before a battle.

“You heard the lady,” Harry said. “Let’s move.”

It wasn’t a long trip, but parts of it were rather steep, and through unfamiliar terrain for most of the group. Without their enchanted glasses allowing them to see clearly at night, they’d not have made it in time. Even so, a number of them were cursing, and Ron noted with some amusement that Bill and Fleur were slightly out of breath - family life must have caused them to slack off a bit, he thought.

He crouched behind a boulder on the hilltop and studied Magical Algiers through his Omnioculars. It was larger than Hogsmeade, and the Dey’s Palace was as big as Hogwarts. It wasn’t as well protected, of course, but its wards were still very strong - quite a bit stronger than those on Malfoy Manor had been. Even Hermione would take a long time to get through them - time they didn’t have.

Time they didn’t need.

“Mediterranean Squadron in position and ready,” Hood spoke through the mirror. “Spotting planes overhead.”

Next to Ron, Hermione fiddled with her own Omnioculars, then nodded at him.

He grinned. “Fire.”

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West of Magical Algiers, Algeria June 21st, 2003

Hermione Granger briefly let her gaze wander over the capital of the Magical Regency of Algiers. It was a very beautiful town. For a wizarding settlement, it was rather new as well - the Regency had moved the entire Magical Quarter of Algiers out of the muggle town after the French had conquered the country in 1830, forming a purely magical enclave to the west of Algiers.

It was also a hub for Barbary Coast raiders preying on the magical settlements in the Mediterranean.
pillaging and kidnapping, like their muggle predecessors had centuries ago. Countless wizards and witches had been held for ransom - or outright enslaved. Magical Europe had never managed to stop them, though the slavers had grown very cautious and restrained themselves while Dumbledore had been the Supreme Mugwump - not even the most greedy slaver wanted to risk retribution from the Vanquisher of Grindelwald. After Dumbledore’s death in 1996, though, the number of raids had quickly increased again as the Barbary Coast wizards grew bolder.

Hermione and her friends had come to put an end to those raids once and for all. That was why Hood and her squadron was here - if they had just come to rescue Gabrielle, they wouldn’t have needed a fleet. But Gabrielle was the perfect excuse for an intervention without causing too much trouble in the ICW for Wizarding Britain. Ever since the unveiling of Britain’s shipgirl fleet, many countries had been voicing their concerns about the threat the fleet represented. After today, that would grow worse. Some of them would try to summon shipgirls of their own, she knew. A number had tried before, without success so far, thanks to the Fidelius protecting the secret. And, Hermione added, thanks to a few careful wordings in Luna’s articles for The Quibbler. She knew, though, that nothing would last forever. Knew and was planning for it.

The witch heard the sound of 15-inch guns firing both through her communication mirror as well as a few seconds later from the sea. She was watching the Dey’s Palace through her Omniculars as the first two shells struck. The wards flared up under the impact, as predicted, but did not collapse. “Fire the next volley,” she spoke into her mirror. Hood’s B-Turret fired, and two more 15-inch shells struck the Palace. This time, the wards didn’t hold, and part of the outer wall was pulverised - together with a smaller building, probably stables, next to it. “Sikh, fire one shell at the palace’s dome.”

“Aye aye, commander!” came the eager acknowledgement of the Tribal-class destroyer, and one of her 4.7-inch guns spoke. Shortly afterwards, Hermione saw the shell hit the dome and explode, blowing a hole into it. “The shell wasn’t affected by any magical protection. The wards are down,” she said.

“Hood, start shelling the harbour,” Ron ordered. “Strike Group - apparate to the palace!”

Hermione stowed the Omniculars, slid her enchanted glasses on and focused on the Palace she had studied so intently. A second later, she stood at the side of the main building, together with the rest of the group. The Aurors and Hit-Wizards were already casting the jinxes to keep the inhabitants of the palace from escaping by magical means. Below them, the shipgirls were turning the harbour to rubble and sinking the Algerian ships.

She saw Harry point his wand at the walls of the palace’s main building and blow a hole in it. Two Hit-Wizards moved with him, covering the breach with their wands.

“Anti-Portkey and Anti-Apparition Jinxes cast,” Bess Elwes announced.

“Strike Group, move in! Hood, start diversionary shelling in one minute!” Ron ordered, then moved towards the breach in the wall.

Following Harry, Ron and the rest of the group inside, Hermione winced. It wouldn’t be a serious bombardment, at least not in the opinion of Hood and the other shipgirls. Just the destroyers lobbing a few shells into the town. Even so, attacking what were essentially civilian targets didn’t sit right with the muggleborn witch. But, Hermione told herself, decent wards would stand up to one hit from a 4.7-inch shell. More importantly though, it was needed, and not just as a diversion for the strike group - the Barbary Coast Magical Enclaves had to finally learn that the days of their slaving raids were over. And for that, the Royal Navy had to make an example.
Inside, she recognised the hallway from the memories of other kidnapped victims the French had provided. As planned, they were close to the Dey’s harem, where prominent female kidnapping victims were usually kept until their ransom was paid. Kept in trust for their families as well as for the kidnappers, the Dey claimed, as an honourable go-between. As if anyone believed his lies.

Hermione saw spells flash ahead of them, and heard someone begin screaming, then suddenly stop.

“Two guards down,” Harry announced through the mirror.

“More coming from the courtyard,” Ron said. “Peters, hold them at bay with your team, we’re pushing on to the harem entrance.”

Hermione ran past the Auror, who was taking cover behind conjured walls. She heard him order a volley of Blasting Curses before she turned around the next corner. Seconds afterwards, explosions erupted behind her.

Another corner. She passed two Hit-Wizards, absentmindedly noting that if Ron and Harry’s plans to form an official ‘Naval Support Force’ out of the usual volunteers for their excursions were to happen, they would need to introduce regular physical training sessions for the recruits, and reached Harry and Ron. In front of them was the entrance to the Dey’s harem. And there was a massive red-skinned figure standing, no, floating before it. A genie.

Hermione hissed through clenched teeth. That hadn’t been in the memories they had seen. Genies were generally as strong and tough as trolls, if not as magically-resistant. But they could cast spells and fly.

Ron turned towards her. “Start taking down the wards protecting the harem. We’ll handle the guard.”

Hermione ground her teeth, but nodded. They couldn’t take too much time, or the Dey’s men, currently confused and panicking, would rally. She had to trust that her friends could handle this.

She looked at Bill. “Follow my lead, we’ll take the wards down hard.” Which meant they would cause the wards to overload and implode, instead of weakening them gradually. A dangerous technique, but far quicker than the alternative. Bill swallowed, then nodded - he was a Gryffindor, after all.

Grinning grimly, Hermione started to cast as Ron and Harry rushed forward.

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Magical Algiers, Algeria June 21st, 2003

The red-skinned genie was as tall as a troll, Harry Potter noted when he moved towards the right wall and sent a Piercing Curse at the creature. He had dealt with trolls before. Next to him, Ron was moving to the left wall, forcing the guard to split his attention.

The genie flicked its saber and swatted the curse away, then roared and flew towards Harry, raising its blade as it dodged a Bludgeoning Curse from Ron. Harry reacted by conjuring a wall in its path. The creature didn’t crash into it, but that didn’t matter much - Harry’s Reductor Curse blew the wall up and sent its pieces flying at the guard.

Or rather, at the genie’s Shield Charm, which deflected them easily. Ron’s Piercing Curse shattered it, but the creature was moving again, its saber flashing, and Harry was thrown back into the wall despite his own Shield Charm. He slid down, rolling beneath another swing, and dove forward, past the brute, casting a Cutting Curse at it from behind.
Unfortunately, the genie moved, and instead of cutting its neck, the spell only caused a gash to open in its shoulder, spilling burning blood. It wasn’t even deep enough to make it drop the saber. It felt the wound, though, and screamed with rage. A second later, fire leapt from its free hand at Harry.

The wizard’s Shield Charm kept the flames from touching him, but the air around him was heating up rapidly. A flick of his wrist, and water started to shoot out of his wand, turning to steam where it met the genie’s fire, countering the blistering heat enough for him to fall back.

A loud explosion shook the floor, and dust joined the steam, further reducing visibility. Harry tapped his enchanted glasses, but with the steam filling the hallway, even the ability to see heat didn’t help. He fell further back – towards the entrance to the harem. The creature would be between him and Ron now, but hidden in the cloud of steam and dust.

Not for long, though - Harry cast a Freezing Charm into the cloud, turning the steam to water, then to ice, revealing the snarling creature - shrouded in flames. It shouted something in a language Harry didn’t understand, waved its hand, and three thin spikes appeared and shot at him.

His Shield Charm stopped two, but the third broke through, and buried itself in his thigh. Harry hissed with pain, but managed to hit the creature with a Bludgeoning Curse that slammed it into the wall. It shook its head, but before it could move, Ron hit it with a volley of Cutting Curses that left deep gashes in its chest, liquid fire pouring out. It screamed, and whiled around, sending fire at Ron - which gave Harry the opportunity to conjure a cage to trap it, while Ron doused himself with water.

The genie struggled to break free, but the cage held it in place long enough for Harry to kill it with Piercing Curses to its head. Panting, he dropped on his good knee, clenched his teeth and pulled the spike out of his thigh. He hissed with pain, but managed to close the wound before he lost too much blood.

“You alright?” Ron asked.

“I’m fine,” Harry said and looked at him. His friend’s robe was scorched, and his hair would need some regrowing, but he was otherwise unhurt - or looked unhurt. Ron wasn’t that much better at being honest about his health than Harry.

“Don’t let Hermione hear that,” Ron said, chuckling.

Behind him, Hermione, looking as tired as Harry felt, Bill - in a similar condition - and Fleur, covering their rear, came up to them. “The wards are down,” their lover told the two wizards, “but we were seen by guards, and one of them escaped. Bess and her group are holding their reinforcements back. We don’t have much time left.” She pointed her wand at the door to the harem. “Alohomora! Depulso!”

The large door was blasted open, and Harry heard shrieks from inside. He moved forward, though his leg was still hurting, and Fleur rushed past him.

“Gabrielle! Gabrielle!” the Veela shouted.

Ron cursed and ran after her. Harry was about to follow him when Hermione stopped him. “Let me check your leg!”

“I’m fine,” he spat.

“That’s why you’re limping worse than Moody?” Hermione pursed her lips and shook her head, flicking her wand. “You won’t bleed out, but you’ll not run until this is treated properly.”
“Good thing we have brooms and portkeys then,” Harry said, grinning while he tried to ignore his pain.

Hermione snorted, then looked back at the other hallway. “More guards are coming from there.”

The two filled the hallway with walls and pit traps while moving into the harem. There Fleur had found her sister, and the two Veela were hugging each other, crying. Several girls and women, dressed in richly-embroidered robes, were watching from a corner, looking frightened. One of them was holding her wrist, and Harry saw a wand on the ground. He glanced at Ron.

His friend shrugged, then touched the mirror on his collar. “Bess, what’s your status?”

“We’re holding them at bay, but they are tenacious. Brave too. Two of us are wounded, but able to walk,” the female Auror’s voice sounded through the mirror.

“Fall back to the Harem and prepare to evacuate. We’ll take down the Anti-Portkey and Anti-Apparition Jinxes,” Ron said. “Peters, prepare to apparate out as well.”

Harry was already doing that - they needed to get out now. He saw Hermione step up to the other witches watching them. His lover said something in Arabic - or so he thought - and the women looked terrified. Hermione pulled out a rope, and repeated the phrase, then beckoned the witches.

While Harry took down the jinxes, Bess and her team arrived - one of them being levitated alongside. The girls who had been approaching Hermione gasped, but a sharp command from the witch had them grip the rope.

“Bess, check the rooms - we don’t want to leave anyone back here!” Ron yelled.

While the Auror ran off, two others of her team sealed the door. Harry took a deep breath. “Jinxes down!” he announced.

“Peters, get out!” Ron said to the mirror. A few seconds later, Peters’s voice announced that they had arrived back at the landing spot.

Harry looked at Fleur, Bill and Gabrielle. “Your turn now.”

Bill looked like he was about to contradict him, but Fleur put her hand on his arm, and the Curse-Breaker relented. A moment later, all three vanished with their portkey.

A scream and a curse had Harry whirl around - and grunt when pain flared up in his wounded leg. That had come from the back of the harem. He looked at Ron, who nodded at him, his own wand aimed. Before the two of them could move though, Bess appeared in the main room, bleeding from her shoulder, and herding three more girls before her.

“Damned scared idiot hit me when I tried to to get them out,” the Auror said.

The girls ran over to the rest of the women and touched the rope after a brief exchange of words Harry didn’t understand. An instant later, Hermione activated the portkey, and they too vanished.

“Everyone else, apparate to the landing site!” Ron ordered.

A second later, Harry landed roughly on the beach, causing more pain to his wounded leg. He clenched his teeth, and quickly checked. Hermione and Ron were there, as were Fleur, Gabrielle and Bill.
“My team’s complete!” Peters announced.

“Mine as well,” Bess said.

Harry saw Ron nod, and touch the mirror again while the wounded were being treated.

“Hood, we’re all clear. Wreck the palace!”

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**Mediterranean Sea, Harbour of Magical Algiers, Algeria June 21st, 2003**

HMS Hood was watching the burning harbour of Magical Algiers when she heard Ron’s order. Smiling grimly, she addressed the ships with her - the Mediterranean Squadron. “Repulse and Prince of Wales, target the Dey’s Palace!” she ordered as her own main guns shifted from the breakwater and harbour buildings to the domed building in the centre of the town and her directors adjusted the firing solutions.

“Ready!” Prince of Wales reported, a second before Repulse.

“Fire!”

Hood’s guns spoke, followed by the broadsides of the battleship and battlecruiser. At that distance, dispersion would be minimal, though Hood wouldn’t want to be near the palace, even though it covered an entire hill - 14-inch and 15-inch shells caused a lot of collateral damage, as the modern military called it, even when they landed right on the mark. But the squadron was here to bombard the place, to teach the pirates, slavers and other wogs - even though Hermione said that they were not supposed to use that word any more - on the Barbary Coast that the days of raiding the European shores were over, and her fleet would do exactly that, just as the Royal Navy had done in 1816.

The harbour was already wrecked. The breakwater and the buildings lining it had been shelled. Sikh and Cossack had sailed inside and sunk the few ships moored at the pier as soon as Hood’s guns had torn down the palace wards. The Algerian vessels had been mostly ancient-looking sailing ships, and one ship that looked like a paddle-steamer, but they were owned and crewed by wizards. And while Hood didn’t know many spells that could hurt shipgirls, that didn’t mean there were no such spells - or magical devices.

Only a fool would have assumed that they were harmless, and Hood was no fool. She was the admiral in command of the entire fleet of shipgirls of the Magical Royal Navy - which was, as her friends hadn’t failed to point out, fitting for an Admiral-class battlecruiser. Nominally, the shipgirls were part of Wizarding Britain, but they were not under the control of the Ministry of Magic - a fact Minister for Magic Dawlish did his best not to advertise to anyone.

Hood approved of that - as long as Dawlish didn’t try to harm or harass her friends, or do anything too stupid, and listened to reasonable advice, he could keep counting on their support. Another fact Dawlish was very aware of, and did his best not to advertise. The man was a decent politician, after all, even though he hadn’t been a good Auror.

Her main guns spoke again, a second faster than Repulse’s guns, and Hood smiled. Their rivalry had lessened somewhat, after they had come to an agreement with Prince of Wales, but it certainly had not ended just because the two battlecruisers were sharing the battleship - Hood doubted they’d ever have the the relationship Harry, Hermione and Ron had with each other. One thing they had in common though: Their relationship was no one’s business but their own. And maybe Luna’s - the witch had been a source of valuable advice in the past. The battlecruiser smiled, remembering the
passionate talks they had had, long after the blonde witch had finished her articles covering the shipgirls.

“Broom riders in the air!” Cossack reported. Hood saw a dozen brooms fly over the harbour, unfortunately already too close and too high for the tribal-class destroyers’ dual-purpose 4.7-inch guns to engage them.

“Prince of Wales, Repulse - cease firing! Glorious, have your aeroplanes engage the brooms!” Hood ordered.

Sea Gladiators dived at the broom riders, machine guns lining the sky with tracers. Hood saw one wizard, then another crash into the sea, torn to shreds by the Gladiators’ machine guns. It didn’t seem to deter the others though. Hood saw that Acasta and Ardent were picking up speed, ready to intercept any aerial attackers going after the capital ships.

The Algerians were brave, the battlecruiser had to admit. Not many wizards would have the guts to attack her squadron - the Magical World hadn’t forgotten London and Tromso, or the demonstration for the ICW near Azkaban, which had become their home port. Brave, but foolish. Wands simply lacked the range to attack shipgirls who saw their wielders coming. Only Fiendfyre was a real threat to shipgirls on the sea, and Hermione had been working on countermeasures for that.

Sikh and Cossack were taking evasive action now while their pom-poms and machine guns were taking a bloody toll on the broom riders trying to swarm them. Spells were shooting towards the two destroyers from the waterfront as well, though those missed by a mile. So far.

“Suppress the enemies on the pier and breakwater!” Hood said - she wasn’t about to let enemies correct their aim. Her secondary guns opened up, followed by those of Prince of Wales and Repulse. Shortly afterwards, the waterfront disappeared in clouds of smoke and dust thrown up by the shells. The three ships kept the bombardment up for a minute. No spells pierced the smoke afterwards.

Meanwhile, the last two broom riders tried to evade the aeroplanes hunting them by flying low and erratically on top of the waves. They didn’t succeed, and Hood saw one of the planes do a victory roll after killing the last enemy.

The short interruption had allowed the smoke to clear from the palace, and Hood saw that the big dome had collapsed, as had three of the four turrets lining it. But there were still structures standing. The job was not yet done.

“Prince of Wales, Repulse: Resume bombardment of the Dey’s Palace.”

Once more 14-inch and 15-inch shells arced towards Magical Algiers, their impact shaking the earth. Cossack and Sikh were firing their 4.7-inchers at the remaining buildings facing the pier, setting a few more ablaze when their anti-fire wards either overloaded or were torn down with the walls they were anchored to. At least that was what Hood remembered from Hermione’s explanation of the wards on Grimmauld Place, where the shipgirls still stayed when visiting London. If only they would create a proper harbour there!

She saw the last turret of the palace collapse after a near-hit. The remaining buildings were both burning. Hood nodded - they had accomplished their mission. “Hood to all ships: cease firing unless you spot enemies offering resistance, and make for the rally spot!”

Sikh and Cossack darted out of the burning harbour while Hood, Prince of Wales, Repulse and Glorious as well as their escorts started turning, in formation. Behind them, Magical Algiers was burning.
The battlecruiser tapped the enchanted mirror. “Hood to Strike Group: We’re on our way to the rally spot. The palace and the harbour have been destroyed.”

Ron, the wizard in charge of the mission, answered: “Well done, Hood. We’ve evacuated Gabrielle and the wounded already, as well as those freed slaves who wanted to come with us. As soon as you arrive we can portkey you back to England.”

“Understood.”

Hood smiled as her fleet sailed on. This was what the Magical Royal Navy had been formed for. No longer were they merely patrolling for smugglers, and the occasional sea monster; no, they were showing the flag and teaching the enemies of Britain - Magical Britain - that it was foolish to challenge the might of the Royal Navy. If she told that to the muggle admirals who knew about the Magical Royal Navy back in London, they would be jealous - but also proud, she thought.

And it wouldn’t be the last such mission, Hood was certain of that. There were many magical countries where slavery and other despicable practises still flourished. The West Indies, for example, as well as parts of Africa, and of the Americas. Waters which had been patrolled by the Royal Navy when hunting slavers two centuries ago. All of them would learn one thing:

Britannia ruled the waves, again.

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