

Culture Shock Special Circumstances

Title: Culture Shock

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Summary: Harry Potter has just received his Hogwarts letter, but really doesn't want to go. After all, who would want to live on a *planet* of all things? Especially one where the inhabitants still think nuclear energy is an advanced technology. And let's not forget the 42,000 light year commute.

Author's Note: A very strange idea of a crossover that came to me while reading one of Iain M. Bank's Culture novels.

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Chapter One

Special Circumstances

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Her name was Diziet Sma. An unusual name, by the standards of British society, but not one that would raise too many eyebrows. Of course, a great number of eyebrows would have shot to the sky had she introduced herself fully. Rasd-Codurersa Diziet Embless Sma da' Marenhide was, after all, a bit of a mouthful and a name decidedly outside the realm of British society and experience.

For that matter, Sma herself was more than a little removed from what the people of Great Britain would consider normal. Oh, she could pass herself off quite well in a crowd... perhaps receiving a few more admiring looks than most. Exceptional beauty was not the best way to hide in plain sight, but she was able to blend in if she ever felt the need.

This made her stroll down the road of Privet Drive, in the town of Little Whinging, Surrey, something of a tricky business. Little Whinging, and Privet Drive in particular, were places where "normal" was the order of the day. Every day.

As far as Sma was concerned, this made the place dreadfully dull.

"Tell me again, Skaffen-Amtiskaw," she said to her companion, "why you had to drag me out of bed and to this place?"

"Something rather unusual happened late last night, local time," explained Skaffen-Amtiskaw, who was trailing behind her.

"Here?" asked Sma, glancing back at the drone. It was slightly smaller than a small suitcase and had a light-grey casing that seemed to fade into the background in the early morning light. It was hovering at about her eye-level.

"No," replied the drone, giving a small shake indicative of a shrug. "The incident itself occurred several hundred kilometres away, in a small village called Godric's Hollow."

"Then why are we here and not there?"

"Because we tracked the apparent source from Godric's Hollow to this location."

Sma made a show of looking about, taking in the rows of houses, each identical to the one before. The monotony was almost painful on the eyes. "So," she said, continuing her trek down the street, "what exactly happened that caught the *Short Circuit's* attention? I can't imagine anything here that would interest a Mind."

The air surrounding Skaffen-Amtiskaw coloured a purplish maroon, a use of the drone's fields to express emotion. In this case, the drone was presenting the equivalent of a thoughtful frown. Finally it answered, saying, "The Ship detected a high-energy fluctuation coming from Godric's Hollow. By the time it turned its sensors to have a closer look the fluctuation had died down again."

"What was it then?" asked Sma. "Energy weapons? Some other Involved species taking an interest in the place?"

"Neither," replied Skaffen-Amtiskaw. "From what the *Short Circuit* was able to observe in the aftermath, the whole thing was caused by a baby boy."

Sma came to an abrupt halt. She turned to Skaffen-Amtiskaw, her lips drawing into a serene smile that left the drone feeling a rather nervous. “A baby,” she repeated sweetly. “You dragged me clear across the planet... for a newborn baby.”

“Actually, the *Circuit* estimates the child’s age at around fifteen months,” the drone couldn’t help but correct.

Sma lost her smile and stared flatly at the drone. “Are you insane? You and the Ship? A fifteen-month old baby does not cause fluctuations of any sort that could possibly be detected, other than its own bodily function. Even from the same room, let alone a vessel in high orbit.”

Skaffen-Amtiskaw turned to her, its fields flushing a deep green, and said, “Sma... he linked to the hyperspace grid. To both the inferior and superior layers. Simultaneously.”

“What? That’s impossible!”

“Not impossible,” corrected the drone, “merely beyond our ability to duplicate.”

“But how could a baby – a human baby, an organic being – do that?”

“We don’t know,” Skaffen-Amtiskaw readily admitted. “The energy involved was enough to destroy not only this solar system, but most of the surrounding star systems as well. Luckily it was contained.”

“If the *Short Circuit* didn’t actually see what happened, then how do you know it was the baby that did it?” asked Sma.

“Let me show you,” replied Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

The drone turned fully towards her and began using its fields to project the video recording made by the Ship. The view was a little narrow, as the Short Circuit had been at a bad angle, but it was enough for Sma to recognise a small building. Or the remains of one. From what she could see, it had once been a residence of some sort; one of the cosy little cottages that were popular in this part of the world. All that was left, however, were smouldering ruins.

“I thought you said the energy had been contained?” she asked.

“It was,” affirmed the drone. “Just not very well. Now, watch closely – I’ll speed it up for you.”

Sma watched silently as the video played out. Several people soon appeared and began to investigate the wreckage of the cottage – including one man of truly massive proportions. Sifting through the debris, they pulled out a pair of bodies; one male and one female. Both were clearly dead, though in surprisingly good condition when one took into account the damage to the building. Then, the large man found something wrapped in a bundle of blankets. As the bundle was gently moved away from the house, a swirl of sickly green energy erupted from it.

“There,” said Skaffen-Amtiskaw. “That was a residual energy pulse. Infinitely weaker than the original and nowhere close to the visible spectrum, but still detectable by the Ship’s sensors. We don’t think any of the people present noticed it; they certainly didn’t react to it.”

“All right,” agreed Sma. “So the baby was involved, even if it wasn’t the source.”

“Exactly. The *Short Circuit* feels we could learn a great deal by examining the child.”

“Who was brought here.”

“Yes,” confirmed the drone. It paused, hovering uncertainly, before adding, “On a flying motorcycle.”

Sma, who had just resumed walking, immediately ground to a halt. “A flying motorcycle,” she repeated calmly. Too calmly.

Skaffen-Amtiskaw’s fields turned an embarrassed rose and it replied, “I can show you the video footage of that as well, if you like.”

“If you were human, I’d suspect you were glancing *Crystal Fugue State*,” Sma accused the drone.

“Well, I’m neither. Human or intoxicated,” replied the drone. “Now, come on – we don’t have much time. The people involved in rescuing the baby left it on the doorstep of the fourth house.”

“They left a baby, one that had just had a house blow up and collapse on it, on a doorstep?” asked Sma incredulously. She resumed walking, her pace much faster than before. “Just when I thought the people on this planet couldn’t possibly get any stupider.”

“There he is,” said Skaffen-Amtiskaw, using its fields to project a glowing yellow arrow pointing in front of them.

Sma hurried across the lawn and to the front door of number four Privet Drive. There she found that the drone was right, as it usually was. Bundled against the cold early-morning air, was a slumbering baby boy. Resting across his chest was a letter. Brushing it aside, she gently lifted the baby off the doorstep and held him up for inspection. Her eyes were immediately drawn to an ugly cut on his forehead, shaped like a lightning bolt. The surrounding skin was an inflamed red and a sickly yellow crust lined the actual wound. Closer scrutiny revealed a few bruises and other scrapes.

“They haven’t even tried giving him any medical attention,” she breathed unhappily.

“What does the letter say?” asked the drone, looking over her shoulder at the baby. It used its fields to levitate the sealed parchment up in front of her. Shifting the baby so that she was cradling him in one arm, Sma snatched the letter out of the air and tore it open. The pair read what was written there with interest that soon shifted to amusement, then disbelief.

"Magic," said Sma, after having read the letter a second time. "They're talking about magic. Spells and curses."

"Clearly," said Skaffen-Amtiskaw, "this civilisation is more primitive than we had first thought."

"Or maybe just the people on this island," suggested Sma.

"They're leaving the baby here so that he will be kept safe from... the dark lord's minions," concluded the drone, looking over the letter again. It was unable to hide its disbelief. Its fields were alternating between a frosty blue and a deep purple, clearly having difficulty control its emotions. "Mad. They're completely mad. No one that's achieved an industrial society on this level could possibly believe this – this nonsense unless they were completely demented."

"We've seen stranger things," Sma reminded it. "And stupider."

"Perhaps," allowed Skaffen-Amtiskaw, "but this is ridiculous. It borders on the absurd. Magic!"

"Many on the things we do would seem like magic."

"To a bunch of primitive barbarians, yes – but these people have some measure of actual scientific knowledge. How could anyone believe such superstitions after they've reached such a level?"

"Regardless of their beliefs, in magic or not," said Sma, "what do we do now?"

"Well, I suppose we examine the child, or rather; I'll examine the child, and then we go on our way."

"And just leave him here?"

Skaffen-Amtiskaw was quiet for a while, a sure sign that it was thinking very hard. "These are his people, Sma," it finally said, its voice quietly modulated. "It's not our place to remove him from their care."

Sma glared at the drone and turned so that it had a clear look at the injury to his head. "Care? Does this look like proper care to you, drone? His parents have barely been dead a day, yet here he is – abandoned on a doorstep. They couldn't even be bothered to speak to his new guardians in person!"

"Sma—"

"You know as well as I do, Skaffen-Amtiskaw," Sma cut off the drone's protest, "that the Culture would do just about anything for the ability to access both layers of hyperspace simultaneously."

"Just about, maybe. I'm not so sure about kidnapping a baby orphan," replied the drone.

"Do you deny that we'd look after him properly? Raise him, educate him as one of our own?" challenged Sma. "Can you honestly say that he'd have a better life here, on this backwater planet, than he would in the Culture?"

"This is not exactly a decision we—"

"Check with the *Short Circuit* then. Ask its opinion. Have all the other Minds in Special Circumstances put it to the vote."

"That'll take days, Sma. Weeks even," Skaffen-Amtiskaw argued.

"Days and weeks we can spend doing a proper job of it, not a rush job like we had planned," countered Sma.

Skaffen-Amtiskaw was silent for nearly two seconds. It took this time to have a very long and slightly heated debate with the GCU *Short Circuit*, the General Contact Unit currently orbiting far above them. Finally it bobbed up and down, its fields shading a dark yellow. "Very well," it conceded. "We can take the boy with us for the time being. Goodness knows; we'll certainly be able to give him better treatment than anyone else on this planet. But remember, if the Minds decide to send him back here..."

Sma smiled and cradled the baby closer to her chest. "Of course," she agreed.

"Now let's hurry up and return to the Module," urged the drone. "The sun's almost up and I'd prefer nobody see you."

As they hurried away from number four Privet Drive, Sma tickled the baby's chin. Surprisingly vibrant green eyes cracked open and stared up at her. She smiled and said, "Hello, Harry Potter."

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Albus Dumbledore had departed from Privet Drive, in the company of Minerva McGonagall and Rubeus Hagrid, and proceeded to the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. There, he and his companions had a quiet and solemn breakfast. Conversation was rare and muted, consisting almost entirely of small and inconsequential things. Nobody wanted to talk too much about young Harry and his remarkable defeat of the dark lord. Certainly, the other patrons present in the pub were singing such praises loudly enough for all of them.

After breakfast the old wizard would floo to the Ministry of Magic, where a great deal of work needed to be done. There were Death Eaters to round up and trials to begin planning. Not to mention the task of making certain that nobody would be able to track down Harry Potter's location. It would

not do to have the saviour of the Wizarding World hunted down and hounded.

It would not be until late the following morning that the headmaster would have a chance to return to Hogwarts. Having been kept away by a full day and a long night of interminable meetings, Dumbledore went straight up to his office and adjoining private quarters. There he ate a belated breakfast and turned in for a short nap, just long enough to relieve his body of the tiredness spreading through it.

He awoke an hour before the start of dinner and, having changed into a set of fresh robes, he spent a pleasant evening watching as his staff and students continued to celebrate their liberation from Voldemort's oppression.

The following morning, before going down to breakfast, Dumbledore made to check that the various devices he had arranged to monitor Harry Potter were in working order. He had no doubt that they were; he trusted his own skill in the matter, but it never hurt to make double sure. Several minutes later, the various portraits of past headmasters were treated a very unusual sight.

Dumbledore, who had a reputation of being utterly unflappable, began to swear like a Muggle sailor.

Harry Potter was not safe and sound in the Dursley household. Certainly, the devices reporting on his health and wellbeing confirmed that he was indeed safe and sound, but his location was not as expected. He was, by every indication, nowhere near Little Whinging. He was not to be found in Surrey, or even anywhere within the borders of Great Britain. In fact, he had seemingly disappeared off the very face of the Earth itself.

It would be a decade before Dumbledore realized just how true that was.

TBC...

Culture Shock Contact

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Chapter Two

Contact

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Albus Dumbledore set the letter he was holding down on his desk. He stared blankly at it, not a hint of what he was thinking or feeling entering his expression. It was a Hogwarts Acceptance Letter. Three days ago, dozens of similar letters that had been sent out to all eligible magical children throughout Britain. This letter, however, had not reached its recipient.

Mr H. Potter
Unknown

He looked to the shelf that held the various magical instruments attuned to Harry Potter's magical signature and life force. All the devices were working properly. Dumbledore had checked and re-checked this dozens of times over the past ten years. Yet the readings given by them were completely mystifying and, in some cases, went utterly against any sense of reason.

By all accounts, Harry was the very picture of good health. Perfect health, actually. In fact, healthy beyond anything Dumbledore had imagined possible. The boy had not been sick for even a single day in his life. He had not suffered any noticeable form of injury, aside from those few scrapes and bruises one would associate with a little childish roughhousing. Even those were treated and mended so quickly that even Madam Pomfrey would have struggled to keep up. He was well fed and got sufficient sleep at regular intervals. His mind and thoughts were being simulated to remarkable levels on an almost daily basis. The emotional indicators would swing through the entire gamut of feelings; from happiness to sadness to anger to determination and back again, but seemed to spend the bulk of their time in a state of simple contentment.

All told, Dumbledore had a more than reasonable idea of Harry's physical and emotional wellbeing. And, if his interpretations were accurate (which he felt comfortably certain of), then he would not do a thing to change it. He doubted that any living environment he could provide would manage to duplicate the one that Harry was already in; one where he was obviously thriving.

It was those knickknacks that kept track of Harry's location, relative to Hogwarts, that left Dumbledore truly befuddled. First and foremost was an enchanted compass, whose needle would always point towards the boy. A problem arose, however, in the fact that the needle would never settled down in a single direction. Not once in ten years. In the first few weeks the needle had swung round and round, completing four revolutions each day. After that, it had settled to only one revolution a day, though there had been a period of roughly a month (four years ago) wherein it had shifted in some complicated manner before settling down again. Regardless of the change, the needle continued to spin lazy round its axis, completing one revolution a day.

The only conclusion Dumbledore could reach was that Harry remained in a state of perpetual motion. Which was a ridiculous idea, but the compass and three other items of a similar nature continued to give the same result. This was seemingly confirmed by another magical locator; a silver pendulum attuned to display Harry's distance from Hogwarts at any given time. To begin with the device had vacillated greatly, giving indications that Harry was anywhere between only a few hundred up to ten thousand miles away. This variation had originally been synchronised to the rotation of the compass, shifting back and forth four times a day. Then, at the same time that the compass had shifting to a singular daily rotation, the pendulum had swung up and frozen in place – indicating that, somehow, Harry had moved beyond the range of its divination.

Dumbledore regarded the letter laid out before him.

Mr H. Potter
Unknown

That last word, which should have been Harry's address, caused the headmaster a great deal of pause. Ordinary means would not have been enough to hide Harry from detection. No, only magic would have been able to accomplish such a feat. This was a conclusion which left Dumbledore with a burning question. Who could have stolen Harry away from his relatives, despite the various protections that had been in place, and then cast the spells needed to hide him so thoroughly?

Dumbledore had spent the past decade trying, through one means or another, to track down Harry's location. All without success. In truth, he had long since accepted that Harry would not be found so easily. Thus he had begun laying down the groundwork needed to accomplish the one thing he hoped would be able to coax Harry (or whoever was hiding him) out into the open. He could not locate Harry, no, but he was able to track the boy's magical signature. This would not be particularly helpful if Harry were hidden away behind, say, a Fidelius Charm, but it would be enough for

the ritual that Dumbledore had uncovered.

Most rituals were frowned upon by the Ministry, in part because they almost always required a sacrifice of some sort, but Dumbledore had been fastidious in his research. The ritual was most assuredly not dark and the only sacrifice required was however much magic was needed to accomplish its purpose, and as it required thirteen witches and wizards to complete even that would scarcely be a danger.

It was quite simple really; Harry's magical signature would be used to focus the destination of a specially created portkey. The portkey itself would not be stable enough for use by a living creature, but that was hardly necessary. Directing the ritual's energies at Harry's acceptance letter would result in the letter itself being turned into the portkey, which would then find its way to wherever the missing Boy-Who-Lived might be hidden.

All the headmaster needed now was to find a dozen people willing to help.

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Several days later and an extraordinarily long distance away (much more than Dumbledore could have imagined), the boy now known as Sol-Terrasa Harry Potter dam Marenhide, found himself waking up much earlier than he normally would.

"House?" he asked blearily, pushing himself up and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Sorry to disturb you, Harry," answered a deep and smoothly cultivated voice.

Recognising that he was being addressed by someone other than his abode's AI, Harry quickly glanded some *Snap*. The Culture's favourite breakfast drug, guaranteed to wake up anyone not on death's door, brought the eleven-year old boy's mind to full alert. He had a feeling that he would need all of his faculties up and running for the coming conversation. The Mind that controlled and regulated Staff Orbital would not interrupt one of its human citizen's sleep without an exceptionally good reason.

"Hub? What's wrong?" asked Harry as he climbed out of his sprawling bed. Realizing that Harry was going to be moving about, doubtless to get dressed, the Hub asked the House AI to slowly bring the illumination in Harry's room up to normal levels. "Thanks," said Harry, crossing to the nearest cupboard. "Now, tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing is *wrong*, per se," replied the Hub, sounding slightly affronted by the idea. "I did, however, detect an unusual energy reading in your room not long ago. As you were asleep, I thought it best to wake you."

"I know I wasn't having a nightmare," replied Harry, pulling on a pair of shorts. He knew that his abilities, which had made him possibly the most widely known individual in the Culture, would sometimes make themselves known if he had a particularly vivid dream.

"I do not think it was your doing, Harry," said the Hub. There was a sudden pinprick of light that rapidly expanded into a silver sphere, which disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. A tall, lithe and handsome male figure in a navy blue suit was left standing in the spot it had occupied. By Culture standards he was fairly nondescript. "The signature pattern was somewhat, if only slightly, different to your base form. I believe that someone or something else was responsible."

Harry regarded this copy of the Hub's avatar, through which it would often interact with the Orbital's human population of seventy-billion. Tying the straps to his thin cotton summer shirt, Harry turned his thoughts inward and considered what the Hub had told him. As with any human member of the Culture, Harry was intelligent beyond what the limits of unaltered biology could provide; the genetic modifications had been made shortly after he had been found. But there was one thing he possessed that could not be induced by recombining DNA.

Intuition. It was something that relatively few people in the Culture could call upon with any reliability, even its multitudes of drones and Minds. Harry was one of those exceedingly rare people who could intuitively grasp the nature of a situation, even with only a scarce few facts and clues. This was something that drew almost as much attention to the young boy as did his other abilities.

"You seem rather calm," he observed with almost equal tranquillity, which he took some pride in accomplishing without the use of glanded *Calm*. "Which means that you don't think this was an attempt to kill or kidnap me."

"Possibly," the Hub allowed, moving to sit in one of the wicker chairs on Harry's balcony.

Harry dutifully followed the avatar and took the seat nearest it. They stared out into the pre-morning gloom. The system's primary, Sesis, would not be rising for another half-hour. Both sunrise and sunset on an Orbital tended to be events of considerable beauty, so Harry was not adverse to sit outside and wait for it; even to the detriment of his sleep.

"It's been what? Three minutes?" asked Harry with a grin. "I'll bet you've a thousand theories by now."

"One minute, forty-seven seconds," corrected the Hub mildly, "and we do, in fact, have somewhat over seventy-four thousand theories as to what might possibly be the cause of the disturbance."

"We?" asked Harry, his grin growing a little wider. "Who else is joining us this morning?"

"I am in direct communication with as many Minds that are within range," replied the Hub, turning its deep indigo eyes to Harry. "What happened earlier was not anticipated and, therefore, is of some moderate concern."

"Let me guess," said Harry. "Dual layered Grid energy being used in the vicinity of the only human in the Culture that can manipulate said energy in a similar fashion. Clearly not coincidence. It was done, whatever it was, in a manner similar to my own efforts, but still different." He returned the avatar's gaze and felt his earlier grin become somewhat predatory. "You suspect involvement by someone like to me."

Very good,” the Hub nodded. “Yes, we do.”

“And which, of the seventy-four thousand possibilities you’ve thought up, do you consider the most likely?”

Hub gestured and a holographic display appeared before them. Whether it was a House system doing the projection, or the avatar itself, Harry could not tell. He turned his attention to the image, replete in charts and graphs, now hovering in front of him.

“Leaving out a lot of technobabble,” it explained, “the waveform I recorded bares a significant similarity to your own method of teleportation. There are some very big differences, as you can see, but this was clearly some form of matter transmission.”

“Displacement?” asked Harry, referring to the Culture’s method of instantly moving matter from one point to another. It was by this method that the Hub had sent one of its many avatars to Harry’s bedroom. It was only used for human transport in cases of dire need, as the technology had a one in eighty million chance of causing a fatality in whatever was being Displaced. Such was an example of just how cautious a Culture Mind was; that such seemingly long odds were considered too dangerous for everyday use.

“No,” the Hub shook its head. “There was no resemblance to the Displacer Effect. In fact, the GCU *I Thought He Was With You* pointed out that it actually bears some degree of similarity to the base-nine mathematical model of a wormhole.”

Harry leaned back in his chair, which creaked softly under his shifting weight, and stared up into the fading night. He could easily make out the thin line across the sky that was the opposite side of the Orbital’s ring, three million kilometres distant.

“Were you able to track it?” he asked.

“No,” the Hub shook its head. “It did not last nearly long enough to trace to its start point.”

“So its destination was Staff? Me in particular?”

“We believe so, yes.”

“Based on?”

“While I was unable to trace the energy all the way back, I did manage to narrow it down.”

Harry dropped his gaze down to the hologram and watched as the various graphs (most of which he actually understood) were replaced by an image of the galaxy, as seen from above. A small, but bright green dot appeared, tagged as their location on the Staff Orbital. A good distance away, nearly a quarter ways round the galactic circumference, a large red blob appeared. This was labelled as being the volume of space where the energy disturbance was most likely to have originated from. Harry gave a low whistle, impressed by the distance between the two. Forty thousand years, at least.

“A lot of space to cover,” he eventually said, referring to the rather large red sphere the Hub had indicated.

“Eleven thousand, six hundred and four cubic parsecs,” replied the Hub.

Harry blew out a breath. “Any idea where to start?”

The Hub nodded. “As a matter of fact, yes.”

The red blob shrank down and coalesced into a single bright point; a star system. The label attached to the former blob shifted to accommodate the change in display and now read something that made Harry jerk upright.

“You’re kidding me!”

“No, I am not,” replied the Hub. “I checked this thoroughly, as have the other Minds. Whatever caused the disturbance, did so from somewhere inside a volume of space centred on your home star system; Sol.”

Harry slumped back in his chair, too surprised to reply. He had, of course, known where he was from, as well as the events leading up to his being removed from the planet in question. For the most part he hardly ever thought about it. While the knowledge was there, it meant very little to him. Harry could remember his early childhood on the S’ Jet Orbital, where he had lived until four years ago. Of Terra, or Earth as most of its inhabitants preferred, he had not a single memory.

“Harry?”

Harry hardly noticed the arrival of Skaffen-Amtiskaw, the drone that spent most of its time living with Harry and his adopted mother. The drone had been summoned back to the dwelling as soon as the Hub had detected the energy reading in Harry’s room. Seeing that its charge was preoccupied, the drone turned to the Hub’s avatar and silently queried it as to what exactly was going on.

Several minutes passed in silence, both avatar and drone waiting for Harry to emerge from his thoughts. Finally, Harry looked up to ask something of the Hub. He paused and blinked, clearly surprised by the unexpected appearance of Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

“Good morning, Skaffy,” he greeted, though obviously distracted.

“Good morning, Harry,” acknowledged Skaffen-Amtiskaw, not bothering to complain about the nickname.

Hub, are you sure?" asked Harry, turning to the avatar.

"It seems the most likely conclusion," replied the Hub.

"Perhaps this might yield some answers," said Skaffen-Amtiskaw, using its effector field to raise something into the air. Both Harry and the Hub looked at the object in surprise.

"It's... a letter," concluded Harry, reaching out to pluck the sealed envelope out of the air.

Hub turned to the drone, clearly demanding an explanation. Skaffen-Amtiskaw supplied one to both Harry and the Hub, though the Mind received a far more detailed report. "I noticed it as I passed through your room," it explained, while simultaneously transmitting a copy of its memory of the event to the Hub. "It has your name on the front."

Harry looked at the envelope's front, which was addressed in bright green ink to *Mr H. Potter, Unknown*. The words were completely alien to him, as he had never been bothered to learn a Terran language. He stared in disbelief and turned back to the others, most especially the Hub. Holding it up for both to see, he asked incredulously, "Someone opened a wormhole from Terra to Stafl, a distance of at least forty thousand light-years... to deliver a *letter*?"

"That does seem rather... odd," agreed the Hub.

"What do you expect? Those people are all crazy," put in Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

Harry broke the wax seal on the envelope and pulled out the letter it contained. He noticed that it was not written on paper, or at least not paper of the same quality that was produced in the Culture. Of course, hardly anyone used paper as a means of communication. A few eccentrics might; for special occasions, but paper was rarely handled by anyone other than those practitioners of the more traditional art forms.

The Hub leaned closer and examined the letter. While it looked as if it were using only its avatar's eyes, the Hub Mind was actually inspecting the object of its curiosity at a nearly atomic level. It raised an eyebrow in surprise and proclaimed, "It is written on parchment, not paper."

Carefully unfolding the letter, Harry scanned the contents. Almost immediately he grimaced and shook his head. "It's not written in Marain," he complained, referring to the Culture's shared common language. "And it's not any language I recognise."

Skaffen-Amtiskaw shifted through the air until it was hovering over Harry's shoulder. It tilted down, as if to examine the letter itself, though this was an action made more for show than anything else. It promptly began to read; easily deciphering the primitive English dialect it had learned during its Contact mission to Earth, ten years earlier.

"Hogwarts School of..." the drone trailed off. Its fields flared a lurid orange.

"Of?" prompted Harry impatiently.

"Of witchcraft and wizardry," the drone finished. Not bothering to finish reading, it drifted away from Harry, muttering all the while. "I knew it. I *knew* it – those Terrasa are all completely and incurably insane. Mad, they're mad!"

Harry blinked and repeated, "Witchcraft and wizardry?"

Hub reached over and took the letter from him. "They are reported as being a rather odd minded species of humans," it said, before reading over the letter itself. Several pauses marked its recitation, primarily after the rather long string of titles associated with the school's headmaster. It quickly finished with, "Yours sincerely, Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress."

Harry whose expression had grown somewhat dazed as the avatar spoke, shook his head in pure disbelief. "Magic," he said. "They have a school for teaching magic. And they want me to attend."

"I believe it must be a traditional institute, as you have never had a chance to enrol," said the Hub.

"What's an owl? And when is thirty-one July?" asked Harry suddenly, recalling the letter's last paragraph.

"An owl is one of Terra's avian species," supplied Skaffen-Amtiskaw, returning from its rant on the madness of Terrestrial humans. "A nocturnal breed, though I can't imagine why they would think you have one. Perhaps as a pet? But then why would they be expecting it? And the thirty-first of July is roughly the mid point of the year, by their calendar. If I recall... it would be seventeen days from now."

"Eighteen actually," the Hub corrected. "You neglected to account for our having a slightly longer day."

As the drone and the Hub haggled over the accuracy of their respective calculations, Harry examined the letter again. The words were still wholly foreign to him, an odd way to regard one's home language. After taking in the fine details of the ornate crest that served as a letterhead, he was about to slip it back into the envelope when he noticed a second piece of parchment still inside it.

"There's something else," he announced, drawing the others' attention back to him. He held up the second letter, which was also covered in the strange and unfamiliar script of written English.

Skaffen-Amtiskaw extended a field and took the letter from him. It read the contents, Hub alongside it, and was soon huffing and puffing about the mental competence of Terran humans. It sounded even more exasperated than it had after reading the first letter.

"Well?" prompted Harry.

"It appears to be a supply list," said the Hub, returning the letter to Harry. "Skaffen-Amtiskaw is rather disdainful of the various items you will be required to have. The titles of the books are not too bad, but the demand for a magic wand is rather disconcerting."

"A magic wand?" repeated Harry dumbly.

"Amongst other things," the Hub confirmed.

"Perhaps Skaffen-Amtiskaw is right," Harry relented. "They are mad."

"Magical Theory!" exclaimed the drone. "A History of Magic!"

"There is also a rather strange prohibition against broomsticks," added the Hub.

"Broomsticks? You mean the ancient cleaning implement?"

"Madmen, the lot – completely and utterly out of touch with reality!"

"Hub, I need to think about this."

"Take your time, Harry. We will be thinking it through as well."

The trio sat, in Skaffen-Amtiskaw's case floated, quietly and stared out at the slowly lightening sky. A hint of burgundy was beginning to appear spinwards, as the Orbital rotated back into the sunlight. What few clouds were present began to glow a deep orange, with the occasional highlight of soft yellow. Finally, after many minutes, the glowing disc of Sesis appeared to coalesce in the sky. On the ring-like structure of an Orbital, there were no horizons for the sun to rise over or set under.

Harry leaned as far back as his chair would allow, immersing himself in the morning vista. It was a perfect environment to allow one's thoughts to drift, giving him the chance to study the situation in a relaxed manner. The Hub and Skaffen-Amtiskaw spent most of this time in silent conversation, their words and ideas being sent back and forth at speeds a human mind could not hope to match, or even properly comprehend.

"There's a chance I could actually learn something from these people," Harry declared, finally breaking the silence.

"Agreed," was the Hub's reply.

Skaffen-Amtiskaw was slightly more verbose and said, "While it's doubtful they have any scientific theory behind it, they should be able to teach you *how* to do whatever mumbo-jumbo they consider magic. Once you've learned how they access the Grid to manipulate Space-Time, we'd simply apply what theory we do know to reverse engineer the processes."

"I'd have to leave StafI," said Harry. "Go back to Terra."

"We are still unable to create a stand-in that can duplicate your abilities," said the Hub by way of confirmation.

"I've been raised almost my entire life by the Culture. Would I be able to pass as a Terrasa?"

"Physically, yes," said Skaffen-Amtiskaw. "What changes we've made have been entirely on a genetic level, thus far. To an external observer, you'd appear no different than anyone else on the planet."

"Blending in to their civilization, their society will be the hard part," concluded the Hub.

"Do I have to do it?"

"No, but we would prefer that you did."

That was as close to a command that the Hub, or anyone else in the Culture, could make of him. Harry knew that he could refuse to go, that he could remain on StafI without reprisal. He also knew that nearly his entire life, ten years, had been shaped by the Culture. All that he was as a person could be traced directly to that single fact. He had been raised as one of them and, as far as anyone was concerned, was one of them. This brought with it a degree of obligation, something he was unable to ignore.

"There are a few things I'd like. I'm not insisting, but..."

"Of course."

"I'm not going alone."

"You most certainly are not!" exclaimed Skaffen-Amtiskaw in loud agreement. "I intend to be with you every step of the way and I'm sure Sma will be there as well. Contact will also want to have a Ship Mind present, so we'll likely have a GCU to monitor things. Special Circumstances will also be keeping an eye open."

"I want a neural lace. I'll need to learn the language and that would be the fastest way."

"It is unusual for someone so young to have an implant," said the Hub, "but not something we would refuse. Your cranial development is mostly completed and the lace would be able to adjust itself for any further growth."

Harry hesitated before making his last request. This one, he felt, would meet some resistance. The Culture eschewed violence whenever possible, though it fought with terrible efficiency when need be. "I'd like a knife-missile placed under my control," he asked. "The most advanced you have available."

The Hub's avatar frowned and Skaffen-Amtiskaw's fields flared a pale green, with streaks of grey.

"Harry, I--"

"No offence, Skaffen-Amtiskaw," said Harry quickly, "but you're much bigger than a knife-missile and much more noticeable."

"Very well," the Hub acquiesced after a moment, one filled with fierce debate amongst the various Minds involved in the venture. In the end they decided that Harry would be safer with a knife-missile permanently watching him than without. "We will have one assigned to you once your neural lace has been implanted."

"All right then," Harry confirmed his agreement to the plan with a nod. "When do we leave?"

"The Medium Systems Vehicle *Facts & Fallacies* will be departing Staff tomorrow at 1375," replied the Hub. "It will transport you and your party as far as the GSV *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out*."

The earlier hologram of the galaxy was projected into the air again. A bright yellow line shot out from the point where Staff Orbital was located, reaching a good ten-thousand light-years out before terminating. That was where the rendezvous would take place. Another line extended out, this time about seven-thousand light-years, followed by a third that extended the remaining distance to the Sol system.

Harry examined the route briefly, taking note of the various Ships involved in his journey. He turned to the Hub's avatar and raised both brows. "You're shifting quiet a few Ships around, including two GSVs. You must think this is important."

"Very," admitted the Hub.

Considering the hologram and the route highlighted on it, Harry mused, "It's not exactly close, is it? Forty-two thousand light-years total. It's going to take, what, three months to get there?"

The Hub nodded. "Give or take."

"And you had this all planned out five minutes after you woke me up, didn't you? Before we'd even read the letter."

"Twenty-two point six seconds, actually."

"I supposed I'd better start packing."

"I can do that for you, Harry," interjected Skaffen-Amtiskaw. "Why don't you go to Sma's room and tell her the good news?"

Harry sent the drone a mixed look. Diziet Sma was rarely a pleasant person so early in the morning. And he had little doubt that she would be even less pleasant upon learning that their plans had been made without any input from her. Sighing in defeat, as well as acknowledging that at least Sma would probably not kill him for being the bearer of bad news, Harry rose from his seat and returned inside the house.

Digging underneath the chair in front of his bureau, Harry found a pair of loose sandals and slipped them on. He spent a short while, seconds really, running a comb through his hair in an attempt to tidy it up a bit. The results were minimal. Apparently not even the Culture's remarkable talent for genetic engineering could tame his unruly black locks – he knew; they'd tried on six separate occasions before giving up. He collected his communications terminal from the nightstand and, as it was fashioned to look like a plain gold ring, set it in place on his right ring-finger.

Leaving his room, Harry wound his way through the house in search of his ever wayward adopted mother. It was an average sized house by Culture standards, comprising of nearly a fifty rooms, of which more than half were bedrooms of one sort or another. Diziet Sma would normally sleep in her own private bedroom, two doors down from Harry, save on those occasions when she had brought home company. On those nights, she invariably used one of the other rooms that were available; ostensibly so that any bedroom activities would not disturb Harry's sleep.

It was in the fourth room he checked that Harry met with success. He paused in the doorway and regarded the naked figures sprawled on the bed. He had seen Sma's nude body on a semi-regular basis for as long as he could remember. The Culture's human citizens were never ashamed of their bodies (which could easily be tailored to any shape they desired) and were thus somewhat lacking in terms of modesty. Even Harry tended to sometimes wander about the house sans any clothing.

More than familiar with Sma, he considered her companion, whom he had never met before. His gaze lingered for several long seconds on the man's semi-erect phallus, which seemed equal in size to one of Harry's forearms. He wondered how Sma had managed to accommodate something so large. Shrugging away such thoughts as being unimportant, he stepped fully into the room and crossed to where his adoptive mother was sleeping.

"Sma," he said softly, reaching out to gently shake her shoulder. "Wake up."

"Tishlin?" Sma slurred tiredly, not opening her eyes. "Again?"

Harry looked down at his guardian with mixed humour, and a twinge of jealousy, before saying, "I wasn't aware we'd had a first time, Mother."

Sma blinked awake quickly after hearing that. Despite the fact that she was for all intents and purposes Harry's mother, the boy would rarely refer to his as such; preferring to use her given name. "Harry?" she asked, sitting up in alarm. "What's wrong?"

Harry's eyes dipped briefly to her breasts before rising to her dark brown eyes. "I think we should speak alone," he said, glancing at the man sleeping next to her.

"Oh, sorry," apologised Sma, finally becoming aware of her nudity. Swivelling onto her feet, she stretched out to grab a shimmering silk dressing gown that was lying discarded on the nearby carpet. Even as he left the room Harry admired the view, especially the manner in which Sma's full breasts swayed gently. Wrapping the gown round her body, she followed Harry.

The pair descended to the ground floor and found seats at one of the counters in the spacious kitchen. Few humans in the Culture knew how to cook, so they waited patiently as the House AI prepared breakfast for them. Several jugs of various fruit juices were available and they each helped themselves to a glass of their favourite flavour.

"So, what has you waking me up so damned early?" asked Sma as they sipped their drinks.

"I received a letter from Terra this morning," said Harry blandly.

"What?!" Sma spluttered, choking briefly on her juice.

"Apparently they used something like a wormhole to deliver it to my bedroom," explained Harry. "It's an invitation to attend a school there; a place called Hogwarts."

"Why would they want you to go to school there? And how did they find you – we're thousands of light-years from Terra. For that matter, how could they have even sent the letter to you? They don't have anywhere near the level of technology to do that."

"The Minds say they weren't using any technology. Just as I don't use any."

Sma set her glass down and stared at him. "You mean... accessing the hyperspace grid?"

Harry nodded, "That's their conclusion."

"And this school they've invited you to?"

"Will hopefully teach me the arts of witchcraft and wizardry."

"You're joking."

"I'm afraid not," replied Harry. He handed her the envelope he had stored in a shirt pocket. As it had been Diziet Sma that had removed him from Earth, he was confident she would be able to read the writing on the letters inside. If not, then her implant would be able to translate it for her.

Sma quickly finished her glass of juice and began reading, the acceptance letter first and then the supply list. By the smell of things, the House was nearly finished cooking their breakfasts. She looked at Harry and asked, "So what? You're asking me for permission to go to this... Hogwarts?"

Harry shook his head. "No, the Minds have pretty much decided I have to go."

"You don't *have* to."

"If I refused, they'd just keep bothering me until I did."

"They can be persistent," agreed Sma.

"And I do owe it to the Culture," sighed Harry.

"So you're going then," concluded Sma. She then asked, "When?"

"Tomorrow," replied Harry. "It's already agreed that you and Skaffen-Amtiskaw will accompany me. If you want to."

"Of course we want to, silly," Sma chided gently, ruffling his already messy hair. "Besides which, if there's enough people like you on Terra that there's a proper school to teach you, then Contact will be wanting to find out how we missed noticing them when we were there."

"That is already the cause of much speculation," said the Hub's avatar, announcing its presence as it and Skaffen-Amtiskaw entered the kitchen.

"If they're all as mad as those letters suggest, I doubt we'll find any rational explanation," said the drone as it floated to the counter.

"Are you sure this will be safe?" Sma asked, directing her question to the Hub.

"As sure as we can be," replied the Hub.

"What sort of resources will we have in orbit?"

"The General Contact Unit *It's Not My Fault* will be with you for the duration of the mission. Two other GCUs will be in the system, but not around the planet itself. A further seventeen GCUs will remain within a month's travel distance."

"No big guns?"

Not dedicated to this assignment, no," replied the Hub.

"The GSVs *Lucid Nonsense* and *You Must Be Joking* have flight plans filed that will keep them in the immediate area for the next two-to-three years," added Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

"Do we have any *real* idea what we're getting ourselves into?" demanded Sma.

"Aside from these letters, and the one that you found with baby Harry; not a clue," answered the Hub cheerfully.

"Fantastic."

-oOo-

[New M16-level Core Group formed. @n4.58.176.3839

Name: Interesting Times Gang (Act VI).]

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

So.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

So? It that all you have to say?

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

The perfect lead up to a conversation.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseis system, [solo]):

Irregardless, the matter is resolved. At least the initial stage of it. Harry has agreed.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

I am uncomfortable with this course of action we have decided upon.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

As am I. Harry Potter is the only human we have found, in an entire galaxy full of them, that can perform such manipulations of Space-Time. We are very lucky to have stumbled upon him; especially so soon after the incident with the Esperi Excession. Sending him into a potentially dangerous situation, especially at such a young age, is a risk.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

Risk is our business.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

How droll. Need I remind everyone of Harry Potter's other unique abilities? He is also a Referrer. There are only forty-one others like him in the galaxy.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Harry Potter is barely eleven years old. Far too young to either confirm or deny that he is a Referrer. At this point he is only a Potential

Referrer. There are over a million others in the same category. For the purposes of this discussion, it is his ability to access and manipulate the Hyperspace Grid layers that is of relevance.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Saseris system, [solo]):

You are far too concerned by only a single aspect of the whole. All of Harry's abilities are relevant to any situation regarding him. You are failing to see the galaxy for the stars.

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

Have we still had no success in determining what part of his genetic code is responsible for his abilities?

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

None whatsoever. From all appearances, there's nothing in his DNA that cannot be found in any other human.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

We've clone grown hundreds of remote-controlled duplicates over the years. We even downloaded into a few of them the mindstates people who had recently suffered a body-death. None of them have had any success in reproducing Harry Potter's achievements.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Saseris system, [solo]):

It is always possible that it is an inheritable trait. Most are. Harry's children are more likely to have such abilities than any genetic clones we grow.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

But it makes no sense! It *has* to be genetic! Unless you're suggesting that the Terrasa humans are correct and it's all really magic and voodoo witchcraft.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Has any thought been given to breeding Harry Potter and observing the results?

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

As *End In Tears* said; he is only eleven. His body hasn't matured enough to go around impregnating females.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class)

Even so, I'm sure he'd enjoy trying!

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Has he expressed any interest in doing so? Most humans begin to experiment at that age. We could easily find a woman that would be willing to allow him to practice intercourse with her. With the implantation of a neural lace, it would be an easy thing to stimulate his spermatozoa production.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Saseris system, [solo]):

It would be possible. Harry has engaged in some kissing and light petting amongst his friends [text and details attached]. He also has an interest in Diziet Sma, though it is doubtful he would ever act upon it.

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

Diziet has always been very reliable. Excluding the incidents with Cheradenine Zakalwe. Would she be willing to take Harry to bed and bare a child from him?

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

Having worked with Ms. Sma in the past, I'd say that she would; provided the request was couched in terms of potential benefit to the Culture. The fact that she is Mr. Potter's guardian and mother figure might present a problem though .

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseis system, [solo]):

Whatever you do, I suggest you don't have Skaflen-Amtiskaw try to reason with her. She would refuse only because it was the one asking.

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

True. The pair have a very strange relationship.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves. I agree in principle to the idea of introducing as much of Harry's DNA into the gene pool as is possible. However, he is not yet ready for such a task; mentally more than physically.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

What do you propose then?

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Accelerate his progress in the field of human sexuality. The journey from Staff to Terra will take approximately three months. The first part will be spent on the MSV *Facts & Fallacies* . There should be an adequate supply of pubescent females for Harry to spend time with. Likewise the GSV *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out* and the GSV *Thorough But... Unreliable* . This should give him time and opportunity to gain some confidence in that area, which will hopefully make it easier when the time comes for a fully productive coupling.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class)

Subtle. I like it.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Agreed.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseis system, [solo]):

I will inform the relevant Ships.

~

Harry stood quietly in one of the many observation lounges that were scattered about the MSV *Facts & Fallacies* . He watched in melancholy silence as the ringed hoop of Staff Orbital grew more and more distant.

“We’ll be entering hyperspace soon, Harry,” announced a soft voice from his terminal ring.

“Thank you, Ship,” replied Harry, not taking his eyes away from the view before him.

The Orbital was far enough away by now that Harry could hold his hand out at arm’s length and blot out nearly three-quarters of its massive shape. Then, in the span of a heartbeat, Staff shrank in size to pinprick of light. A few seconds later that too had disappeared from sight, leaving only the vast blackness of galactic space.

A hand settled on his shoulder and he looked up to see Sma smiling down at him. “So, how does it feel to be leaving home?” she asked.

“Kind of the same as when we left S’ Jet,” he replied, “but also different somehow.”

“We left S’ Jet because I was needed in the Rabaroansa Cluster, and Staff was the closest Orbital,” explained Sma. “Despite that, we were still only moving from one Culture Orbital to another. This time’s different, because we’ll be leaving the Culture behind.”

“How long do you think it’ll be before we can come back?” asked Harry.

“Who knows?” replied Sma. “You’re a fast learner, Harry. Probably only a few years.”

“That suddenly seems like a very long time.”

“Don’t worry; it’ll pass so fast you’ll hardly notice.”

“You know, I’ve never really asked... what’s it like?”

“You mean Terra?”

“Yeah.”

Sma considered this as she led her young charge to a nearby divan. They settled down, shoulders brushing lightly against each other. She knew that he was asking for her impression of the planet, not the raw data that he could easily acquire by asking the Ship Mind, or even Skaffen-Amtiskaw. They sat watching the view of hyperspace, the image of which the *Facts & Fallacies* was filtering for human sensibilities.

“It’s much like any other planet I’ve been to,” she replied. “Better than some, worse than others. They don’t really have anything like a united government; in fact there are hundreds of separate countries and nations. Naturally they’re all fighting and killing each other over silly things like resources; precious metals, fossil fuels or even ridiculous historical beliefs – prior claims to land or the like.”

“And the people themselves?”

“In some ways they’re like the Culture – very diverse, no one person exactly the same,” replied Sma. “On the other hand, they’re very territorial, regionalised and prone to killing each other over little things like money.”

Harry shook his head and admitted, “The entire concept of this ‘money’ is very strange. Exchanging pieces of paper for food and services... I honestly don’t know if I’ll ever figure it out.”

Sma laughed and buffed his head, “Don’t worry, we have the next three months to teach you.”

“What’s the country like, where you found me? End-gland?”

“England, or the United Kingdom of Great Britain,” corrected Sma.

“That’s a mouthful. I’ll stick with *England* , I think. So, what’s it like there? It’s an island, right?”

“Yes. You can look up the geographic data later,” said Sma, nodding. “It’s a rather... traditional place, I suppose. Lots of castles and ruins of castles. A bit cramped by Culture standards, certainly compared to S’ Jet and Staff, but there are some wilderness areas. I didn’t get a chance to spend much time there. The people seemed friendly enough.”

“I don’t think I like the language,” admitted Harry.

“English isn’t Marain,” Sma agreed, “but none of the Terrasa languages are.”

“But it sounds so... so uncouth!” protested Harry.

“It’s a naturally developed language, Harry. Of course, it’s uncouth by comparison,” Sma reminded him. “Don’t forget; Marain was developed by the Culture’s earliest Minds to appeal to poets, engineers as well as the average person. It was designed from start to finish to be an aesthetically appealing language, be it in a spoken or written form.”

“Do you have to put up with this sort of thing every time you go on a job for Special Circumstances?” asked Harry.

“More or less,” admitted Sma. “The last time I was on Earth, I had a couple of extra toes added, a joint removed from each of my fingers and a rather generalized ear, nose and cheek job. The Ship insisted on teaching me to walk differently as well.”

“If the Culture used money, I’d be demanding a lot of it,” grumbled Harry.

“You are getting a neural lace several years earlier than normal,” Sma grinned, taking a somewhat wicked pleasure in Harry’s complaints. “And I’ll make sure to throw a really big birthday party for you when we arrive.”

“We will be arriving just before my birthday, won’t we?” mused Harry. He frowned and, for the first time, wondered at the accuracy of that statement. “But it won’t really be my birthday, will it? It’s just the day you and Skaffy found me on a doorstep.”

“Yes,” Sma reluctantly admitted. “November second, by their calendar.”

“Do you think this Minerva woman will be able to tell me when my real birthday is?” asked Harry.

“I don’t know. I imagine she should, if they have any reliable records.”

“Maybe she’d even be able to tell me about my parents,” said Harry, thoroughly intrigued by the idea. He was not particularly excited by the idea, having grown up with Sma as a mother figure and Skaffen-Amtiskaw as a combination uncle, tutor and nanny. Not to mention the dozens of aunts, uncles, drones and Minds that had been present at various times. Still, the thought of learning about the people who had conceived him was an enticing one.

“Who knows,” he conceded, “Maybe this won’t be so bad after all.”

TBC...

Author’s Notes:

First off; regarding the Culture timeline – I’m modifying it to suit my own wants, so simply take it for granted that the events in all the currently published books have already taken place. The storyline of *Look to Windward* would have occurred no more than five or six years before Harry receives his Hogwarts letter. Some compression has been allowed so that Sma’s not too ancient and decrepit by this point; even for people with a lifespan of four-hundred odd years.

I expect that some people will be confused about the references to Terrasa. This is a facet of the Culture’s language that revolves around a small little fact about how Culture humans are named. In English a person from Earth or Terra would be called an Earther or Terran. The Culture, however, use the suffix ‘sa’ to denote location, thus the Culture would refer to us as Earthsa or Terrasa. This is, of course, in their own language Marain. When a character is speaking in English, they will use the more conventional Earther and Terran.

Regarding the date of Harry’s celebrated “birthday”, I’m basing this off the fact that I don’t think Dumbledore would have bothered to include such information in his letter to Petunia, therefore leaving Sma and Skaffen-Amtiskaw with no way of knowing Harry’s true date of birth. The date of November 2nd is deduced by several facts. Voldemort was defeated sometime on Halloween night; October 31st. The following day, November 1st, Vernon Dursley saw wizards celebrating in the streets, while Professor McGonagall observed the Dursley family. Dumbledore and Hagrid arrived that night to leave Harry on the doorstep. Petunia would therefore have most likely found Harry sometime the next morning, November 2nd. Sma and Skaffen-Amtiskaw arrived shortly before sunrise that day, before the Dursleys woke up and discovered Harry. They then arbitrarily assigned that date to Harry as his birthday, being the day they picked him up.

I don’t really know how far I’m going to go with this story – certainly I intend to cover Harry’s first year at Hogwarts (or however much will be left by the time he actually arrives at the planet). While the first year will follow the canon storyline somewhat, after that I intend for things to diverge substantially. Also, the level of detail chronicling Harry’s time at Hogwarts might vary depending on circumstances – perhaps with some rather lengthy gaps and breaks.

Finally, the GCU *It’s Not My Fault* (Escarpment Class) will be the Culture starship on the spot and thus the principal Mind that Harry will interact with for the bulk of the story. However, it is mentioned that two other GCUs will be flitting about the solar system for the duration. While it’s doubtful they will have much of a part to play, if any, I’m open to suggestions for names.

The next chapter will feature some of Harry’s journey home.

Culture Shock Homeward Bound

Title: Culture Shock

Author: Ruskbyte

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Summary: Harry Potter has just received his Hogwarts letter, but really doesn't want to go. After all, who would want to live on a *planet* of all things? Especially one where the inhabitants still think nuclear energy is an advanced technology. And let's not forget the 42,000 light year commute.

/oOo\

Chapter Three

Homeward Bound

\oOo/

Dumbledore had not felt so bone-weary in years. It had been over four decades since he had last spent a night in the hospital wing, following the epic conclusion of his battle against Grindelwald. Now, however, he had been suffering under Poppy Pomfrey's tender care for nearly two whole weeks. It reminded him of just why her patients were always trying to escape her clutches.

But, it was all over now, finally. Thirteen days of enforced bed rest in the hospital wing, recovering from an unexpectedly severe case of Magical Exhaustion.

"Remember, Albus," insisted Madam Pomfrey, "Nothing more strenuous than a Vanishing Charm for the next couple of days, understand?"

"Of course, Poppy," agreed Dumbledore.

"Then I suppose you're free to go," she relented, indicating the doors.

"Thank you, my dear."

It was difficult to maintain a stately pace as he left the hospital wing, rather than a wild dash. Dumbledore immediately turned left and followed the shortest route to his office. Doubtless the paperwork had been piling up during his absence. He wondered, somewhat fretfully, at what had happened during his attempt to contact Harry Potter and the consequences thereof.

The ritual to convert Harry's Hogwarts letter into a portkey, using the boy's magical signature as a destination, had proceeded without complication. Due to the nature of the magicks involved, thirteen participants were required to focus the targeting portion of the portkey spell. It could have been done with only seven or nine people, but thirteen granted the spell greater arthimantic precision.

What Dumbledore had not expected, however, was for the ritual to drain so much magic in order to complete itself. All the documentation indicated that it would require a little more than three times the power of a regular portkey. Dumbledore alone should have been more than sufficient in terms of power to accomplish that. Instead, the ritual had sucked up every bit of free magic available to it – which consisted of the headmaster and his twelve assistants. The drain had very nearly killed them all. In fact, Dedalus Diggle *had* died, though Madam Pomfrey had been able to revive him before it became a permanent condition. The end result had been thirteen witches and wizards spending nearly a fortnight recovering in the hospital wing.

And Dumbledore had no idea why.

"Turkish Delights," said Dumbledore to the gargoyle guarding his staircase.

Stepping onto the rotating staircase, the headmaster took a moment to catch his breath. The strain of having nearly all of his magic depleted, so very quickly at that, had also left his body feeling the worse for wear. As he rose up to his office, he contemplated the possible reasons as to why the ritual had acted as it had.

Only two things had an appreciable effect on a portkey's power consumption. The distance involved and the strength of the portkey in regards to any wards that it might be required to pass through. Dumbledore had made dozens of international portkeys without any strain and could have

easily handled several times more than what the ritual should have demanded. As nowhere on Earth was so far away as to require that much power, the only conclusion was that Harry's home was protected under incredibly powerful wards – greater than even those surrounding Hogwarts.

Arriving at the headmaster's office, Dumbledore stepped inside and paused. He stood for a minute, appreciating the return to what had essentially been his home for the last few decades. He noticed that Fawkes was perched on his golden stand, waiting patiently. The phoenix was looking very bedraggled, even as Dumbledore watched a feather fell away. There was a burning day coming soon, perhaps even today.

Smiling in greeting to his familiar, Dumbledore looked to the many cabinets that held the various magical instruments he used to keep track of things. He briefly considered going to his pensieve; to dispose of the memories pertaining to Madam Pomfrey's bedside manner. Instead, he crossed to the cabinet which housed those items that he used to monitor Harry's wellbeing and location. It was time to see if his efforts had yielded a result. Opening the glass doors, Dumbledore peered from one device to the next, checking each of them.

At the moment, Harry was awake. His health was as perfect as ever and his mood... excited? No, that was anticipation, perhaps eagerness. It was possibly a sign that Harry had received his Hogwarts letter. Dumbledore made a conscious effort to inspect all of the gadgets that monitored Harry himself, before moving on to those that tracked the boy's location. Reassured that Harry was still in good health and sound mind, the headmaster looked to the next shelf of items.

"Success!" he cried jubilantly, startling several portraits awake.

The compass following Harry's direction had shifted. There was a second compass, set beside it, that had been especially enchanted to match the course that the tracking compass followed. For the past four years, there had been no difference between them. Now, however, the tracking compass's needle had shifted to a new position. It was not much, a mere two degrees, but it was a clear indication that Harry had changed location.

Dumbledore immediately checked the distance pendulum. His elation dimmed somewhat at the sight of it. No change. The pendulum was still frozen in place, at the highest point of its swing, just as it had been for the last decade. Still, Dumbledore conceded as he checked the other instruments, progress had clearly been made. The only other noticeable change was that the climate of Harry's location had changed. Before, the magic had shown him to be living somewhere that experienced temperate weather conditions. Now, however, it seemed that he was in some sort of artificial area – more than likely a highly urbanized city.

Grinning at these changes, a certain indication that the ritual had succeeded, Dumbledore moved to his desk and sat down. He immediately reached for the small silver dish set to one side, opposite the inkwell, and fished out a sherbet lemon. Popping it into his mouth, he leaned back and enjoyed the combined sweet and bitter flavours that filled his mouth.

Harry Potter, he grinned, was coming to Hogwarts.

-OO-

Harry Potter was currently wondering if he could forget about going to Hogwarts and instead remain exactly where he was.

Still a good thirty-thousand or more light-years away from Earth, Harry was once again standing in one of the many observation lounges of the MSV *Facts & Fallacies*. Before him was the impressive sight of a General Systems Vehicle. These were the pinnacle of Culture engineering and technology. Certainly, even the smallest Orbital was millions of times larger, but a Culture GSV was held to completely different standards. In many respects, the GSVs *were* the Culture and thereby represented it, fully.

The GSV *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out*, was a Plate Class vessel – one of the larger types of GSVs built by the Culture. It stretched out for an impressive fifty-three kilometres and was nearly half that wide. The topmost kilometre of the Ship's height was devoted to those facilities needed to house and support the GSV's two-hundred and fifty million human inhabitants. The next two kilometres were engineering spaces, factories, hanger bays, shipyards and everything else that might conceivably be needed to produce whatever the GSV deemed necessary. The bottom kilometre of the GSV was reserved for the machines and engines used propel a hundred trillion tonnes of starship.

Dozens of smaller vessels drifted about, coming and going from the GSV's massive General Bays and assorted docking facilities. They varied from assorted GCUs and ROUs of only a few hundred metres up to a pair of the much larger Desert class MSVs, which despite their four kilometre length seemed almost tiny against the looming General Systems Vehicle. Thousands of even smaller vessels; modules, shuttles and pleasure skiffs scooted through the air envelope that encompassed the GSV and was sustained by its fields.

"Pretty slick, isn't it?" asked Skaffen-Amtiskaw, from where it was floating next to Harry.

~ *Yeah*, agreed Harry silently, not bothering to actually speak out loud. Instead he used his recently implanted neural lace to transmit his reply. The procedure had been done the night after the *Facts & Fallacies*' departure from Stafl, during Harry's sleep. He had gone to bed as a relatively ordinary boy (for the Culture) and had woken up with an implant that could almost put humans on an equal footing with a Culture drone. It was a very big almost.

"Come now, Harry," chided Shaffen-Amtiskaw. "You might have been able to learn English overnight, thanks to your lace, but you won't acquire any true familiarity with the language unless you take some time to actually speak it."

"But it's so clumsy compared to Marain!" protested Harry, in that same language. "Speaking English makes me feel like I'm talking with a pair of socks stuffed in my mouth. It's awful."

"Unless you intend to keep your mouth shut the entire time we're on Terra, you'd best get used to it," countered the drone primly.

"Fine," Harry sighed, relenting to his guardian's wisdom.

"Very good," said Skaffen-Amtiskaw, its aura field glowing in rosy satisfaction.

"Skaffen-Amtiskaw? Harry?" called the *Facts & Fallacies*, gaining their attention. This particular ship rarely bothered to use avatars or remote drones to interact with its three million human passengers, preferring to use voice only. "We will be docking with the GSV *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out* in two minutes."

"Thank you," replied Skaffen-Amtiskaw, speaking for them both. The drone extruded an appendage field, coloured a friendly green, and used it to gently turn Harry away from the lounge's floor-to-ceiling window screen. "Come along, Harry, we'd best head to the departure foyer."

Harry and the drone moved to one side of the room and descended down a broad staircase that connected the observation deck to the one below. The room was moderately crowded with several dozen of the *Facts & Fallacies*' human crew, all eagerly awaiting the chance to visit the GSV.

"Any idea where Sma is?" Harry asked, looking over the throngs of people in search of her.

"She was in your apartments having a bath, the last time I checked," replied the drone.

~ *Sma? Where are you? It's almost time to leave*, called Harry, using his lace to transmit to his wayward guardian.

~ *I'm nearly there*, replied Sma. ~ *The Ship's already packed our luggage and displaced it to the GSV.*

~ *We'll wait for you by the stairs leading up to the observation deck*, Harry told her, before disconnecting. He turned to Skaffen-Amtiskaw and said, "She's on her way. Can you keep a look out for her?"

"I see her," announced Skaffen-Amtiskaw, using a field as a pointer.

"Sma!" called Harry, waving her over.

Quickly spotting her companions, Sma slipped through the clumps of waiting people and joined them by the stairs. "Sorry," she apologised. "Lost track of the time."

Skaffen-Amtiskaw wiggled in the drone equivalent of a shrug. "Actually, you're almost perfectly on time," it told her. "We'll be docking with the *Stood Far Back* in three seconds." Immediately following its words, the broad doors set to one side of the room slow slid open, revealing a corridor leading into the GSV. Skaffen-Amtiskaw turned to the two humans and asked, "Shall we go?"

"Let's," nodded Sma.

The trio moved with the flow of the crowd and soon found themselves by the doors.

~ *Goodbye, Facts & Fallacies*, said Harry as he stepped off the Medium Systems Vehicle and into the GSV. ~ *Thanks for the ride.*

~ *You're perfectly welcome, Harry Potter. Enjoy the rest of your journey home*, replied the Ship.

Harry had taken less than half a dozen steps into the other Ship when a stunningly beautiful red-haired woman approached them. She was accompanied by a miniaturized copy, only half a metre long, of the *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out*. "Hello," she said, extending a hand to Sma. "Welcome aboard the *Stood Far Back*. I'm Verloef Schung and this," she gestured at the model GSV, "is one of the Ship's remote drones."

"Thank you for the welcome, Ms. Schung," accepted Sma, shaking the woman's hand. She nodded to the drone. "Please to meet you."

"Likewise, Ms. Sma," replied the Ship. The diminutive GSV drone turned to Harry. "And you as well, Mr. Potter. I'm pleased to have you aboard. I certainly hope to have a chance to witness your extraordinary talents firsthand."

"Thank you, Ship," acknowledged Harry, somewhat indifferent to the GSV's attention.

It was a fact that almost every child born into the Culture was spoiled to one degree or another, as their civilization was easily able to cater for any reasonable request they might make. And more often than not, any unreasonable requests as well. Oddly enough this did not prevent them from developing into relatively well balanced people. Harry was no exception and had, in fact, grown up surrounded by Minds, drones and adult humans, all of which expressed great interest in his abilities. As such, he was perfectly used to being the centre of attention. Indeed, he almost expected it.

"The Ship's General Board have arranged a small reception for you," said Verloef. "We know you had wanted to just pass through, but *Your Mother* won't be arriving for another three days, so we're hoping this will make up for the delay."

"*Your Mother*? I gather that's the Very Fast Picket that we're supposed to take?" asked Sma as the group began to walk.

"Yes," said the Ship. "The *Facts & Fallacies* made better time than we had thought it would."

"I'm certain we will enjoy our stay," said Skaffen-Amtiskaw diplomatically.

"You have an unusual name," said Harry, addressing the drone floating beside him. "What made you choose it?"

The remote drone's fields flickered with amusement as it related, "It was the result of an argument between the Culture and several other Involved civilisations. Nothing too important, but they were complaining about the Culture's Ship naming policy. Apparently they felt that vessels with so much

power and responsibility should have names with more *gravitas* .”

Sma and Harry snickered, while Skaffen-Amtiskaw’s fields flashed an amused pink.

The auditorium where the reception was being held was about half the size of the average sports stadium. Brilliant and complex chandeliers hung down from the arched and vaulted ceiling. Apparently the internal architecture in this portion of the *Stood Far Back* was comprised mostly of rich, dark brown webwood panelling and broad amber and orange marble columns. There were easily a thousand people and assorted drones milling about, most already engaged in conversation and unaware of their guests’ arrival.

“Ms. Sma! Delighted to meet you,” proclaimed a drone that immediately flew up to them. Its fields were a mixture of formal blue, rosy pleasure and oscillating streaks of crimson and scarlet. Evidently it was delighted to meet them.

The greetings and introductions came in at a rapid pace after that. Then only reason Harry was able to keep track of whose name went with which face was his extensive training as a Potential Culture Referrer. Even so, he was grateful to now have a functional implant; there were just too many. People were literally lining up to meet them. A few trays floated by, bearing assorted snacks and finger foods. Harry snagged a delicacy of some sort; his lace identified it as cheese pastry, and tried to subtly move away from the yammering adults.

Sma and Skaffen-Amtiskaw noted his increasing distance from them, but said nothing. The miniature *Stood Far Back* also drifted away, making sure to stay within speaking distance of the retreating boy.

“Don’t like crowds much, do you?” it asked, after Harry had found a quiet spot near an extravagant marble statue.

“I don’t mind a good party,” replied Harry, munching on his pastry. “But I spend so much time with adults on a normal day that when I have the opportunity I prefer to find people my own age to talk to, you know?”

“I understand the concept,” replied the Ship. Minds, regardless of type, only rarely had any opportunity to meet in a physical manner like this. Having more than two GSVs in the same star system at the same time was not something that happened every day.

“I like the music, though,” said Harry, not wanting the *Stood Far Back* to think that he didn’t appreciate the welcome aboard.

“Yes, it’s a very poignant piece. Are you familiar with it?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“It’s the third movement of *Expiring Light* .”

Both Harry and the miniature *Stood Far Back* turned to the person that had unexpectedly joined their conversation. Of course, the GSV had been aware of her approach the entire time, but chosen not to say anything. It masterfully began to back away, leaving Harry to his own devices.

It was a girl of about Harry’s age, perhaps a little older, wearing a short purple dress that was enticingly low cut, with a bright yellow sash around her waist. Her hair was a complicated mass of golden blonde braids, suspended above her head by decorative silver globes held aloft by fields. Her eyes were a deep blue that reminded Harry of summer skies on StafI. She extended a hand to him and, in a humorously officious voice, identified herself as, “Masaq’-Sintriersa Chomba Lassils dam Palacope.”

“Sol-Terrasa Harry Potter dam Marenhide,” replied Harry, taking her hand and bowing down to lightly brush his lips over her knuckles.

“Oh, a charmer,” giggled Chomba.

“I try,” replied Harry, straightening up. Recalling how she had entered the conversation, he asked, “*Expiring Light*?”

“It’s the symphony written by Mahrai Ziller, the Chelgrian Composer.”

“Ah, yes. He’s the one living in exile on Masaq’, right?”

“Yes, though I’ve not had a chance to meet him, I’m afraid. He wrote the piece as a commission for Masaq’s old Hub. It’s about one of the last actions in the Culture-Idiran War. You must have learnt about it. The Twin Novae Battle for the control of Arm One-Six?”

“Messy business,” Harry commented, content to leave it at that. Even eight hundred years after the fact, nobody in the Culture felt particularly happy to discuss the last days of the Culture-Idiran War. It was mostly due to a lingering sense of guilt at having pressed the Idirans for an unconditional surrender, rather than having accepted their earlier attempts to capitulate. The destruction of two stars, and the inhabited worlds orbiting them, still weighed heavily on the Culture’s conscience.

“Grief, yes.” Chomba snagged a glass of pale blue spring wine from a passing serving tray. She took a small sip and stared at him over the rim. “So, you’re the famous Harry Potter; the only human in the galaxy that can access the Hyperspace Grid. The only person in the galaxy, not from one of the Sublimed Elder civilizations, that can connect to both hyperspace layers simultaneously.”

“I can also bark on command,” rejoined Harry dryly, reaching out for his own glass of spring wine.

Chomba laughed merrily at the retort and slipped her free arm round his. Pulling him away from their spot by the statue, she began to drag him to one of the nearby buffet tables. “Let me introduce you to my auntie, I think you’ll like her. Her name’s Estray. She used to have four arms when she was our age. Apparently the extra hands were very useful at parties like this one. I’ve been thinking of getting an extra pair myself. Do you think I’d look good with four arms?”

Diziet Sma and Skaffen-Amtiskaw watched closely as their young charge was dragged away by the enthusiastic blonde girl.

~ He still seems rather subdued , noted Sma, using her neural lace to converse with Skaffen-Amtiskaw, even as she listened politely to the three General Board members that were speaking to her.

~ I think it's mostly a case of homesickness , replied the drone. *~ He's missing Staff Orbital and the people there. It likely doesn't help that he's being uprooted from the Culture proper and returning to a place that he will never have a high opinion of.*

~ They abandoned a newly orphaned child on a doorstep! Of course he's not going to think well of them, retorted Sma, smiling at the tall blue-haired woman that had just spoken. She nodded in agreement and asked a question of her own, one that her hosts immediately set about debating the correct answer to.

~ True , agreed Skaffen-Amtiskaw. *~ I'm merely pointing out that his lowspirits are perfectly understandable. Hopefully he'll be back to normal by the time we reach Terra.*

Sma almost snorted into her drink, but managed to restrain herself. She glanced at the drone, floating placidly by her right shoulder. *~ Considering that every Mind we've met since leaving Staff has been introducing him to various young ladies, I'd be surprised if he isn't.*

Skaffen-Amtiskaw's fields briefly flashed cream with embarrassment. *~ You know, as well as I do, Sma, that incorporating Harry's genetic material into the Culture will have to be done the 'old fashioned' way. Not even a quorum of a hundred Minds was able to trace the DNA markers responsible for his abilities. Our only hope is to breed it into the population.*

~ I've known that for years, drone, replied Sma, shaking the hand of a fourth Board member that had arrived to join the conversation.

~ It's this situation with the magic school, elaborated the drone. *~ The Minds are concerned. And rightly so – Terra is not the most advanced world in that region of space; only a stage-three industrial society. And the people are far too warlike for their own good. Or ours, for that matter.*

~ I understand that , Sma retorted, *~ but what does that have to do with putting Harry out to stud?*

~ The Minds don't think that Harry's abilities will carry over to a newbody, even if we can retain his mind-state , the machine reluctantly admitted.

Sma paused in her conversation with the Board members, something about the *Stood Far Back's* recent stop over at the Masaq' Orbital. She turned to look at Skaffen-Amtiskaw, whose fields were flushed a dark purple. "I'm sorry," she apologised to her human companion, "but if you'll excuse me? Dn. Skaffen-Amtiskaw and I need to discuss something important."

"Oh, it's all right," the blue-haired woman waved off. "We can wait for you to get back."

Sma said her goodbyes and retreated to the same spot that Harry had earlier occupied. Standing in the shadow of the massive marble statue, she turned back to Skaffen-Amtiskaw and glared furiously at it.

"Explain. Now," she demanded.

"You know the Minds have grown hundreds of stand-ins over the years, using Harry's genetic pattern."

"Yes, I've even seen a couple of them. The MSV *Time And Again* likes to use the adult versions as avatars."

"Well, none of the stand-ins have ever shown any ability to manipulate the Hyperspace Grid."

"Maybe that's just because the Minds controlling the stand-ins don't know how to do it properly."

"Sma, any single Mind is literally billions of times more intelligent than the average human or drone. If anyone in the galaxy can figure out how to make a human body access and manipulate the infra and ultra hyperspace layers – it's a Mind."

"I still don't see the problem." Sma huffed and blew a stray strand of honey brown hair out of her eyes. "Somehow, even if the Minds don't know how, Harry can do it. So long as the body his mind-state is active in has the same genetic code as the body he was born with, there shouldn't be a problem."

"Shouldn't" is not the same as *won't* , Sma," Skaffen-Amtiskaw gently reminded her.

Sma pursed her lips and frowned deeply. "They really think that might happen? I mean, it's a school Harry's going to, for grief's sake, not a war zone. How dangerous could it be? It's not like some hideous magical monster's going to try and kill him on his first day in the classroom."

Skaffen-Amtiskaw flushed a mottled mixture of brown and orange. It was clearly worried. "Sma, have you forgotten the letter we found on the doorstep with Harry? Do you remember what this Dumbledore fellow said about the man that killed Harry's parents?"

"The so-called dark lord?" asked Sma, blinking in surprise. "But he's been dead for nearly a decade and the Terrasa aren't nearly advanced enough to record and transfer a mind-state. How could he be a danger? As a ghost?"

"It's not so much the dark lord, as the dark lord's followers that have us concerned, Sma," replied the drone.

As much as she hated to admit it, Sma was forced to agree with the drone and Minds on that thought. Her work in Special Circumstances, the closest thing the Culture had to an espionage agency, had shown her the truth to such statements. Fanatics, especially ones that gathered power quickly, were always accompanied by followers of one sort or another. Glanding some *Recall* to bring back the details, she remembered that Dumbledore's letter had mentioned the dark lord's followers, which had supposedly been one of the reasons why Harry had been sent to stay with his relatives at number four Privet Drive.

Sma searched through the crowds of people, looking for a familiar mop of pitch-black hair. It was simply the easiest way for spotting Harry from a distance. It took only a few seconds before she spotted him, still in the company of the bubbly blonde girl. The pair was having an animated discussion with an older woman, who bore some resemblance to the girl.

"Drone," Sma began, "You remember what happened on Tessrek?"

"Acutely," replied Skaffen-Amtiskaw, its voice utterly devoid of emotion.

"Do you remember what I told you there?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"To use only minimum force from there on," the drone sighed.

"You butchered how many men that day? Fifteen?"

"A dozen."

"And you didn't listen to me when I told you to stop."

"I told you; I simply didn't catch that."

Sma sent the drone a glare. "What's even worse is that you enjoyed it."

Skaffen-Amtiskaw dipped one corner. "I will admit to feeling a certain satisfaction about my actions. But I have done as you requested; I have only ever used the minimum force needed to subdue those people that have attacked you since then."

Sma nodded in agreement and then levelled a flat look at the drone. "And I hope you stick to that. However," she took a deep breath, "if anyone on Terra even looks at Harry the wrong way, I want you to cut loose with everything you have. Effector fields, knife-missiles, X-ray lasers, Antimatter nanomissiles – I don't care what you use or how you use it. I want the fuckers dead before a single hair on that boy's head is mussed out of place. Understand?"

"Absolutely."

-oOo-

"Another cup, Minerva?"

Professor McGonagall nodded and said, "Yes, thank you, Albus."

Dumbledore smiled and gestured at the tea set. The pot rose into the air, drifted over to where the Deputy Headmistress was sitting, and proceeded to refill her cup with the old wizard's preferred blend of Oolong tea. Yes, his magic was certainly well on the road to full recovery.

"There we go," he said, after the teapot had topped up both cups. Once it had returned to its spot on the tea tray, Dumbledore lifted his cup to his lips and blew away a few small wisps of aromatic steam. "How are you feeling, my dear?" he asked, taking a small sip to check the tea's temperature. "I do hope you have recuperated fully from our ordeal."

"Yes," McGonagall confirmed, spooning some sugar into her cup. "Though I dare say you will have a hard time finding volunteers for any future endeavours of a similar nature. What the devil happened, Albus? What went wrong?"

"Why, nothing, Minerva, nothing at all," Dumbledore replied.

"Albus, every single one of us, thirteen witches and wizards, were laid out on our backs in the hospital wing for two weeks. Magical exhaustion on such a scale is almost unheard of in a single person – such a number should be impossible."

Dumbledore chose his words carefully, "My apologies, Minerva, I am not expressing myself well. What I meant to say was that nothing went wrong with the ritual itself. Harry's acceptance letter was converted to a portkey and duly transported to his location. In that respect, nothing went wrong."

McGonagall levelled her most intimidating look at the headmaster. "Then what happened? If nothing went wrong, then why did the ritual drain us of our magic, almost to the point the point of death? In Dedalus' case, quite literally."

"There are only two factors that affect the magical requirements in making a portkey, Minerva. Distance and force."

"So, you're saying that Harry Potter is hidden away at the limits of the portkey's range, which prompted the need for more magic?"

No, I alone would not be able to create a portkey to the task of creating a portkey to anywhere on the planet. No, my dear, I believe the reason for the magical drain was caused by the need for excessive amounts of force. Young Harry, it would seem, is both well hidden and well protected.”

“Wards of some sort?”

“That is my interpretation, yes.”

Minerva McGonagall took a long sip from her tea as she considered this. Finally she asked, “Albus, there has been a lot of speculation over the years, but what do *you* think has happened to him?”

Dumbledore reached for the tea tray and began to butter a scone. “I don’t really know. I can only speculate, based on what facts I am aware of.”

“Oh? I know you have some way of monitoring the boy,” said McGonagall.

“Yes, based on his blood and his magic,” Dumbledore confirmed. He slathered a thick coat of strawberry jam onto the scone as he continued. “The facts, as I know them, are that Harry is in perfectly good health. He literally has not been sick for a single day in his life. His magical capacity is above average and growing at a steady pace. He is living a comfortable life and is, barring the emotional turnarounds one would expect from a child, exceptionally content with his lot.”

“But do you have any idea as to what happened? Who was it that removed him from the Dursleys? Why did they do it and how?”

“I have a great many ideas in that regard, Minerva. Each one, I’m afraid, just as likely as the last.”

“You don’t think it might have been... Death Eaters?” asked McGonagall with trepidation. “Heaven knows that enough of them were able to weasel their ways out of their proper punishments. If they were the ones to get their hands on the poor boy... I shudder to think.”

“I don’t believe that any of Voldemort’s remaining followers are responsible,” said Dumbledore. “Or any other dark arts practitioners.”

McGonagall looked curiously at the old wizard and asked, “How can you be sure?”

Dumbledore smiled benevolently and said, “If anyone were trying to corrupt Harry, to turn him away from the light, they would doubtless seek to bring out his more negative emotions. And yet Harry has spent the past ten years living what I would guess to be a very happy and fulfilling childhood.”

McGonagall frowned thoughtfully. “But if it wasn’t one of the dark lord’s followers that rescued Harry from those Muggles, then who could it be? And if they are aligned to the light, why haven’t they ever contacted us?”

Dumbledore frowned at McGonagall’s reference to the Dursleys. The decision to leave Harry in their care had been a bone of contention between them for many years. He repressed a sigh and thought to answer her query. “I cannot imagine why they would remain quiet for so long – especially not after the public outcry that followed Harry’s abduction. In any event, I’m sure our questions will be answered by the start of term.”

“It’s going to be a circus,” McGonagall muttered. “Doubtless we’ll be swamped by reporters from every publication in Britain.”

“Yes,” agreed Dumbledore. “Quite the welcome back, don’t you think?”

-oOo-

Harry reined his mount in and slowed to a halt. The diaken hound he was riding was an impressively large male called Avalanche, with a dark tan coat and even darker brown stripes. He glanced to his side, where Chomba Lassils sat upon her own steed, a slightly smaller diaken called Anvil. The blonde curls of her hair seemed to glow under the light of the GSV’s daytime, the brilliant streak of illumination on the inside of the atmosphere field envelope that provided the Ship’s environs with their artificial diurnal cycle.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” she asked as she and Anvil pulled up alongside him.

“Very,” he replied honestly. “It’s hard to believe that we’re not on an Orbital, or even a planet.”

“Oh, I’m sure this is much better than any planet could be,” scoffed Chomba. “Can you honestly imagine living on one?”

“I don’t have to imagine. I’ll be,” replied Harry.

Chomba looked at him incredulously and asked, “You’re going to live on a planet? Whatever for?”

Harry pulled on Avalanche’s reins and directed the beast further along the riding trail he and Chomba had been following so far. His companion kept pace beside him as he answered. “I’ll be attending a school there; supposedly to learn more about how to control the Hyperspace Grid. It’s a Contact posting, so I’ll be there for several years at least.”

“Contact?” repeated Chomba, her eyes growing wide with awe.

The Culture was a society that prided itself on the fact that its citizens, be they human, drone or Mind, could study whatever knowledge they wanted to learn, master any skill they wanted to acquire and live in whatever manner of material luxury that they desired. Moreso, all of these things were readily available and, for the most part, relatively easy to obtain. In fact, it was generally accepted that the only thing in the Culture that was difficult to attain was an invitation to work as an agent of Contact. The only thing even harder to come by was a placement in Special Circumstances.

Not even the most renowned and talented of artisans – whether their abilities were inherited or downloaded – were regarded in quite the same

admiring light as Contact members. Thus it hardly surprised Harry that his companion was staring at him in a manner that suggested she wanted nothing more than to throw him to the ground and have her way with him.

"There's even been some talk that Special Circumstances might get involved," he added, fully aware of SC's somewhat notorious reputation. He and Chomba had enjoyed their time together on the *Stood Far Back*, which included several bouts of eager kissing and groping through clothes. Harry was not against playing up his unique situation in the hope of maybe progressing their relationship a little further.

"Special Circumstances? Really?" asked Chomba, staring at Harry almost worshipfully.

Harry smiled gamely and admitted, "SC has been interested in me from the moment they knew I existed."

Chomba nodded thoughtfully and nudged Anvil closer to Avalanche, enough that her leg would brush against Harry's as they trotted along. "Because you can do what they can't," she said. "Something no other Involved in the galaxy can."

"Yeah, the Minds love it," he laughed.

"Really?" Chomba asked. "I would've thought they'd find it horribly frustrating."

Harry nodded to the point and agreed, "They do, but not as much as they enjoy the challenge."

The pair crested the low hill they had been climbing and silently directed their diaken mounts to a halt. They sat comfortably and regarded the broad vista that their vantage point provided them. The lightly forested valley before them stretched out for half a dozen kilometres before ending in the massive multi-level building complex that separated this one nature park from the accommodation section next to it. A large lake glittered in the distance, the sails of various boats tiny flecks of colour dotted about its surface. A comprehensive marina curved around one edge of its shore, and behind that a cluster of houses. Yes, it was very easy to forget that they were currently aboard a ship, billions and billions of kilometres from the nearest star.

"So," prompted Chomba shyly, "what can you actually *do* with it?"

"Quite a bit," admitted Harry. He was a little surprised that she had lasted so long. Most people asked him for a demonstration of his talents within hours, if not minutes, of meeting him. Chomba had held out from asking for nearly two days.

A glance to the sky was enough for him to spot the tiny glint of a hovering knife-missile, doubtless assigned to keep watch over him. Being under a state of almost perpetual observation was such a constant of Harry's life that he could hardly conceive of ever being entirely alone. He gave a miniscule nod, enough that the knife-missile's AI, and doubtless the *Stood Far Back*, would know he was aware of them.

"Here," he said, holding out his hand. With a slight twist of his wrist, he was suddenly holding a darya blossom; widely considered to be the most beautiful flower in the galaxy. He handed the darya to Chomba, who was gazing at the flower in wonder. She held it with extreme care and gently brushed the fingers of her other hand over its soft petals.

"It's real," she said in amazement.

"With my compliments," said Harry, giving her as much of a bow as he could manage while sitting in the saddle.

Chomba laughed with delight, tucked the darya behind her ear, and leaned over to kiss him in thanks. They spent several minutes enjoying the activity before pulling apart, their mounts beginning to grow restless from inactivity.

"Can you really make anything you want?" asked Chomba as they resumed riding.

"Within limits," Harry confessed. "The bigger and more complicated the object, the harder it is. My maximum at the moment is about fifty kilos."

"Wow, that's incredible. What else can you do?"

Once again Harry reined Avalanche to a halt. The diaken hound growled in annoyance, displeased at the constant interruptions. He glanced at Chomba and asked, "Do you want to try something wild?"

"Sure," she agreed.

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment, mostly to fix the image what he wanted to accomplish in his mind's eye. He glanded a small amount of *Focus*, to ensure that he would be less likely to make a mess of things. Opening his eyes, he smiled at his companion and released his visualized intention into the Grid energy that he had drawn to him.

There was a loud crack, like a tree branch snapping, and a sensation of being squeezed and pulled through a narrow tunnel. An instant later, Harry found himself sitting, a bit unsteadily, in the saddle mounted on Anvil's back. Turning his attention to the other direction, he saw that Chomba had also been moved and was now replacing him as Avalanche's rider. They both had to take firm hold of the reins to control the two diaken, who had been startled by the loud sound that Harry's little trick had caused.

"Shit!" swore Chomba, looking around in confusion. Once the initial disorientation passed and she realized what happened, she laughed in delight. "That was absolutely incredible! You can do that any time you want?"

"Any time," Harry confirmed.

"It wasn't Displacement, was it?"

“No,” Harry shook his head. “The Minds call it Under-Jumping. It’s because I travel *undemeath* real space, going through hyperspace.”

“And they have no idea how you do it?” asked Chomba with interest.

“Oh, they have ideas. Even tried a few,” said Harry. “Nothing’s worked so far.”

“What happened when they tried it themselves?”

“They tried with a slave-rigged module on a spare planet in the Sullen Gulf. It’s not there anymore.”

“They blew up the whole planet?” asked Chomba, wide eyed.

“Not the *whole* planet, only about half of it,” demurred Harry. He then shrugged. “It’s not like it really matters – it was only a spare.”

Chomba laughed gaily at the idea of a ‘spare’ planet. Harry grinned in reply and urged Anvil to a trot, noting that the beast was lighter on its feet than Avalanche. As they descended from the hilltop, Harry noticed a couple, a man and woman, reclining on a brightly coloured rug in the middle of a field of long grass and equally brightly coloured wildflowers. They were both birth-naked and writhing against each other; the woman currently straddling the man’s hips.

Glancing back, he saw that Chomba was keeping pace only a few metres behind him. She too had spotted the fornicating pair and was unabashedly observing their sex-making. A light blush coloured her pink cheeks, especially when the woman began to scream in ecstasy as the man clasped her heaving breasts in his hands.

“You know, Ship,” he muttered, soft enough that Chomba would not overhear, but loud enough for the nearby knife-missile, “I’m not against having a girlfriend or three, but next time; just ask before you Minds decide to play matchmaker.”

-oOo-

[New M16-level Core Group formed. @n4.58.189.4971

Name: Interesting Times Gang (Act VI).]

~

x *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out* (GSV, Plate Class):

Well, this is a tad embarrassing [file attached].

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

It’s hardly surprising that Harry would realize what we were up to. He is a Referrer, after all. If any human could assess the facts of a situation and arrive at a conclusion that is as good as one of our own, it would be Harry.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Someone, somewhere, must have made a mistake. There should not have been enough clues for him to divine our plans.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Don’t be such a stick in the mud, *Tears* . Harry has been taught to pay attention to events happening around him. Arranging to have young women meet him at every convenient moment is hardly something he could miss noticing. First there were Ms. Robitaille and Ms. Milne aboard the *Facts & Fallacies* . And now he was introduced to the *Stood Far Back*’s Ms. Lassils. We have hardly been subtle about our intentions.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Perhaps it is for the best. Certainly his cooperation will speed matters up.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

I find it disquieting that a collection of Minds, especially this one, should have such an interest in the mating and breeding habits of a single human.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

Even an obstinate old Mind such as yourself can't deny the importance of young Harry's abilities.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Agreed. And considering the potentially dangerous situation he will soon be entering, it is best that we take precautions.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Agreed. I just dislike the need for such a dalliance.

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

Humans do as humans are. Mating and breeding are an integral part of their existence.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

Agreed. Now, what is the status of the mission to Terra?

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

Things are proceeding to schedule. The GCU *Return To Sender* will arrive at Sol system in nine days. The GCU *It's Not My Fault* will arrive six days after that and the GCU *Artificial Stupidity* will arrive the next day. In total, we can expect nearly two whole months to study the planet before Mr. Potter arrives in system.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

And the transport arrangements?

~

x *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out* (GSV, Plate Class):

Harry will be departing on the VFP *Your Mother* early tomorrow morning. They should rendezvous with the GSV *Thorough But... Unreliable* in eight days. The SL *No Posted Speed Limit* will carry them for the last leg of their journey. Their estimated arrival time is 58.226.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Inform the relevant GCUs that they are to avoid any direct contact with the Terrasa humans until Mr. Potter and Ms. Sma arrive. They can observe and investigate to their fully abilities, but there is to be no interaction. Suggested approach limit is one hundred metres.

~

x *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out* (GSV, Plate Class):

I'll pass it along.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

How is Harry's preparation progressing? Will he be able to integrate himself into Terrasa society?

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

He should have no difficulties, at least for brief encounters. Long-term exposure might prove more difficult.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

The *Facts & Fallacies* reports that Harry has assimilated the English language, which he will need if Hogwarts is located in Britain as we suspect. He has also had the nine other most common languages on the planet downloaded into his neural lace, to be disseminated over the remainder of the journey to Sol.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Everything is proceeding to plan then. Which begs the question; which young lady shall we throw at him next?

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

Sometimes I worry that you are far too interested in human sexuality.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

What of our thoughts regarding Diziet Sma as a potential mate?

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

Ms. Sma is a wily one. Too overt an approach would rouse her suspicions, as well as Mr. Potter's. I think that is due to her extensive experience in Special Circumstances. I suggest we do nothing in that regard, but allow nature to follow its own course.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

Perhaps that would be for the best.

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

Has there been any indication as to how we missed an entire species of Grid-Energy manipulating humans?

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Nothing.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

Absolutely nothing, you mean. We've all re-examined the reports made by the GCU *Short Circuit*. There was no sign anywhere that the Terrasa were capable of such feats. A review of their recorded history also proved fruitless.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

The *Short Circuit* has always been a reliable ship. It is doubtful that any blame can be assigned to it.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Perhaps these "magical" humans are simply very good at hiding themselves, though I don't know why they should do so.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

“Magical” humans? You’re not suggesting there may be some truth behind their superstitions?

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Hardly. I merely refer to them as such, because that is likely how they see themselves. Remember, Harry will be attending Hogwarts School of *Witchcraft and Wizardry* . Clearly they consider themselves to be witches and wizards; practitioners of magic.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

It sounds as though you consider them separate entities to the other Terrasa.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

They must be; else there would be some record of them in the planet’s history.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

One way or another, we will find out by 58.226.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Agreed.

~

[End document/comments track.]

-oOo-

Harry would have been perfectly content to remain in that wonderful state between dreams and reality, save for the fact that his neural lace was forcing him back to the waking world with the reminder that he had to hurry up for the transfer from the GSV *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out* to the VFP *Your Mother* , which was scheduled to depart shortly before midday.

As he slowly worked his way up to full consciousness, forgoing the use of any glanded secretions to speed up the process, Harry became more aware of his surroundings. In particular, he noted that a light weight was draped across his waist and a warm body was floating beside him in the field bed. He could also feel that something was gently tickling his lips and nose.

Blinking his eyes open, Harry tipped his head down to see the slumbering form of his bed mate. It was her long, curly blonde hair that was tickling his face, its strands sprayed out over his chest as Chomba nuzzled into his shoulder.

His memories of the previous night’s activities returned quickly and easily enough. After a filling dinner at one of the more popular restaurants, in which Harry had been introduced to several of Chomba’s girlfriends, they had wandered the Ship for several hours before retiring to a decadently furnished suite of rooms that one of the GSV’s service drones directed them to.

Harry smiled at the memories as he played his eyes over his and Chomba’s nude bodies. The pleasures of the night had indeed been pleasurable and he had every intention of repeating the experience. He twisted about, enjoying the freedom of the field bed’s anti-gravity, and began to try kiss Chomba awake. As he flicked his tongue over her pouting lips, he wondered if actual intercourse could provide as satisfying a night.

“Hmm? Harry?” Chomba mumbled, snuggling up against him. “Again?”

He laughed softly, remembering how Sma had once asked something similar when he had tried to wake her. This time, however, he had the satisfaction of knowing that he was the one responsible for tiring out the lady in question.

“Good morning,” he said, after pressing in for a deep kiss.

“Mmm,” she agreed, rubbing a fist against her eyes. She blinked fuzzily at him for a moment and then immediately perked up, no doubt having used a goodly dose of *Snap* to bring herself to full wakefulness. “Good morning,” she agreed, giving him a kiss of her own. She leaned back, presenting her bare chest, and smiled coyly at him. “And a good night, as well.”

Harry leaned forward, causing them to begin spinning in the air, and circled her right nipple with the tip of his tongue. Chomba's gasps of pleasure gave way to squawks and cries of indignation as he unexpectedly began to tickle her sides. They wrestled playfully and energetically, tumbling wildly inside the anti-gravity field holding them aloft. After several long minutes of raucous laughter, on both parts, they slowly glided to a near stop, drifting round and round as they clung panting to each other.

He used his neural lace to deactivate the field bed and, as the anti-gravity dissipated, they sank to the plush mattress below.

"Harry?" asked Chomba, puzzled this action.

"Sorry," he smiled apologetically, "but we can't stay in bed all day – I'm leaving just before noon, remember."

"Damn," she swore softly, dropping her head to his chest.

"Come on," urged Harry, rising to his feet and pulling her up into his arms. He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and said, "I've heard that sharing a shower can be just as much fun as rolling in the air."

"Oh, really?" asked Chomba, returning his grin.

Harry hugged her tightly too him and kissed her deeply, his erection pressing against her stomach. Understandably, the pair of them took nearly an hour to finish their shower and pull on their clothes before vacating the suite. They arrived in the appropriate departure foyer with barely ten minutes to spare. Sma, no doubt fully aware as to the cause of their delay, watched their hurried arrival with a look of patient amusement.

"Making good friends with the *Stood Far Back*'s crew, Harry?" she asked with a smirk.

"Very good friends, from the look of it," commented Skaffen-Amtiskaw, its aura field glowing a bright pink.

Harry and Chomba regarded the assembled adults, who were all watching them with similar amused and knowing expressions. Harry was barely able to hold back his blush, thanks to a judicious glanding of *SoftNow*, which left him far too mellow to be susceptible to any teasing. Chomba whose cheeks were a tinge redder than usual, simply returned Sma's gaze and politely asked, "Do you really want us to answer that? We might sound immodest."

Sma burst into rich laughter and clapped the two children on the shoulder. "Come on then, Harry," she said. "We need to thank the General Board for the welcome party they put on for us—"

"You should also thank them for introducing you to Ms. Lassils," put in Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

"—and then finish saying our goodbyes," concluded Sma, ignoring the drone's interruption.

"I've already spoken to the *Stood Far Back*, regarding my '*introduction*' to Chomba," said Harry to the drone. He then turned to the girl in question and asked, "Now do you see why I'm running off to a backwater planet like Terra? It's the only way I'll ever be free of manipulative old coots like Skaffy here."

Chomba could not contain her giggles, nor Sma her laughter, as the drone's fields flickered between cream, brown and a light grey. Harry's verbal volley had struck Skaffen-Amtiskaw amidships and left the machine temporarily speechless. This was quite the accomplishment, as anyone that knew the drone would attest.

Sma laughed again and leaned in close between the two children. She brushed her lips briefly against Harry's temple and then whispered, "I'll see about thanking the General Board and you can give your girlfriend a less rushed goodbye, okay?"

"I'll see to your luggage," muttered Skaffen-Amtiskaw, drifting away from the three humans.

"So, I guess this is goodbye," said Harry, turning to Chomba.

"Yeah," she muttered wistfully.

In a society of over thirty trillion beings, spread across just about the entire galaxy, they both knew that there was very little chance that they would see each other again. Certainly, if they ever did have a reunion, it would more than likely be several decades in the future. This was not really a great amount of time, at least not for people that easily lived to be four hundred years old – some even choosing to continue beyond that lengthy span. Still, for two children that were only just beginning their second decade of life, it seemed a very long time indeed.

"I promise to look you up if I'm ever in the volume," Harry swore, hugging her to him.

"And if Contact or SC ever need me to visit Terra, I won't refuse," promised Chomba with a snuffle.

Harry smiled at the thought and leaned in to hug her. Holding her close to him, he whispered in her ear, "I wouldn't be surprised if some Mind did arrange for us to get together soon. They seem to be hoping my talents will be passed down to my kids."

Chomba drew back to stare at him. Her expression was one of surprise and then consideration. Finally, she admitted, "I don't think I'll be ready to have a child for a couple of decades." She then grinned impishly. "But that doesn't mean we won't enjoy practicing, yeah?"

He kissed her softly in reply, deliberately keeping it from escalating in passion. Releasing his hold on her, he stepped back and smiled faintly. Chomba's own smile was equally tremulous, but both remained clear eyed; having always known that their time together would be too brief. Without another word, Chomba nodded politely and turned to leave. Harry did not expect her to remain and see the *Your Mother's* departure. People in the

Culture found it far easier to control their hormones than their emotions.

"Ready to go?" asked Sma quietly, having finished her own goodbyes.

"No, not really," Harry answered, watching Chomba leave.

Taking a commiserating hold on his shoulder, Sma guided the reluctant boy to the end of the foyer, where a short corridor reached across to the waiting Very Fast Picket *Your Mother*. The vessel itself could be seen through the broad windows that flanked the gangway, though it was it much too close to get a proper idea of its size and shape. Skaffen-Amtiskaw floated up to join them, its aura field glowing a subdued purple.

Harry paused on the threshold and glanced back. Sma maintained her gentle grip. Chomba was nowhere to be seen, already disappeared into the depths of the *Stood Far Back*. Struggling to contain a sigh, Harry ducked his head and proceeded down the gangway. As a demilitarised Culture warship, the *Your Mother* had a crew of only twenty-two. That suited him fine, as he really wanted to be alone for the time being.

Glanding an even mix of *Bliss*, *Calm* and *SoftNow*, which would temporarily dull the sharp edge of his emotions, Harry consigned himself to the next part of the long journey leading back to his homeworld. He wondered, not for the first time, if it would be worth all the inconvenience.

TBC...

Author's Notes: Just a few comments regarding the Culture timeline. Simply put; I'm smashing its round shape into the square hole of my story, so that everything will fit according to my own satisfaction. The canon dates are rarely given explicitly, but enough that we can gauge more-or-less when certain events happen.

The first Culture novel (chronologically) is *Consider Phlebas*, which is stated as having occurred in the early to mid 1300s by Earth's calendar. I haven't been able to find any clues as to when the events of *Player of Games* and *Use of Weapons* take place. *Excession* is stated as having occurred at some point roughly 500 years after the end of the Idiran War that was the backdrop to *Consider Phlebas*. This gives a date of somewhere in the 1800s. Diziet Sma is described as having spent time on Earth in the late 1970s, in the novel *State of the Art*. We also know that by the time of *Look to Windward*, the Idiran War has been over for 800 years, which would put the date in the 2100s.

For the purposes of my fic, I'm compressing the whole kit and caboodle so that all the novels will have taken place at a point before 1991, with *Look to Windward* have occurred four or five years earlier, in the mid 1980s.

Culture Shock State of Flux

Title: Culture Shock

Author: Ruskbyte

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Summary: Harry Potter has just received his Hogwarts letter, but really doesn't want to go. After all, who would want to live on a *planet* of all things? Especially one where the inhabitants still think nuclear energy is an advanced technology. And let's not forget the 42,000 light year commute.

/oOo\

Chapter Four

State of Flux

\oOo/

Dumbledore was barely able to suppress his excitement. Word had just come from Hogsmeade that the Hogwarts Express had pulled into the village station and was disembarking its passengers. Two hundred and twenty-six students, ready for another year of study in the magical arts. And following on their heels; thirty-two young witches and wizards preparing for their first year at the greatest school of magic in Europe, if not the world.

And somewhere amongst their number; Harry James Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived-And-Vanished.

The headmaster was eager to see that appellation change to the Boy-Who-Returned.

Having a hard time hiding his grin, Dumbledore collected the Sorting Hat and left his office, beginning his descent to the Great Hall. It did not take him long to arrive and before long he was taking his seat at the High Table. Professors Flitwick, Burbage and Vector were the only teachers already present, though the others soon arrived. Dumbledore's good mood dampened just a fraction as Severus Snape entered the hall and took his place at the table.

It had always been a given that the school's potions master would never get along with any child of James Potter, but Snape's attitude regarding the missing Harry Potter had grown progressively antagonistic in the past month. It had first started when the boy's acceptance letter had come back undelivered. There had been lengthy rants, some public but most private, each one more biting and vindictive than the last.

Matters had reached a head, however, upon the completion of the ritual to portkey Harry's letter to him. Suffice to say, Snape had not accepted his magical exhaustion with quiet dignity and grace. His vitriol against Harry, while recuperating in the hospital wing, had been appallingly spiteful.

Glancing at the man, Dumbledore trusted that Snape would be professional enough to keep his personal feelings out of the classroom. Besides which, the headmaster still held out some hope that frequent interaction between the pair would enable the man to put his past behind him and reconcile his unrequited love for Lily Potter. If not, well, he would not intercede unless matters became excessive. It would do Harry good, after all, to face a certain degree of adversity while in school. And as Dumbledore could easily monitor and subtly direct Snape's actions, this was a perfect arrangement.

Ah, the students had arrived and were filing into the hall. Dumbledore felt a pang of nostalgia that he did not know them as well as he would, were he still an active professor, rather than the headmaster. He so rarely had the opportunity to interact with the children; spending the bulk of his time sequestered away in his office, fighting against the machinations of the Ministry and the school's Board of Governors. Merlin, there were times that he loathed politics.

It did not take long for the house tables to fill up, the students taking their sittings with varying degrees of anticipation. Just on the edge of his hearing, Dumbledore could make out the reverberating thumps of Hagrid bashing against the castle's main doors. A minute later the grounds man entered the Great Hall and shuffled into his place at the end of the table.

A few minutes later, the doors leading to the Entrance Hall swung wide open and Professor McGonagall strode briskly down the centre aisle. Following behind her were the new first-year students. Dumbledore's smile resurfaced as he took in the sight of so many young witches and wizards staring about the hall in such wonder and disbelief.

With the children now clumped in a group at the front of the hall, Professor McGonagall collected the Sorting Hat and a stool for the first-years to sit on. She put the Hat on top of the stool and stepped back, waiting for the tattered piece of clothe to begin its song. Dumbledore, however, was far too busy to take much note of the banal singing; busy scanning the various faces that now stood before him.

Where was young Harry? The headmaster had not seen the boy in a decade. That was a long time, especially with regards a baby boy. None of the young wizards really stood out, nor did any of them catch Dumbledore's eye. He ignored the blonde Malfoy heir, as well as the latest red-haired Weasley. He discounted young Neville Longbottom as well. He knew these children, after all. Instead he narrowed his focus on those boys that he did not immediately recognise.

Absently joining the applause for the Hat's song, not one word of which he would be able to recall, Dumbledore considered his options. There was not a single boy that bore any distinct similarity to James Potter. There was also no indication that Harry might have taken after his mother in appearance. Still, there were several possibilities to choose from.

"Abbot, Hannah," McGonagall called, beginning the Sorting.

Not bothering to pay any great attention to what was happening; Dumbledore continued to narrow things down. He began by concentrating on those boys with either black or dark brown hair. There was little chance at this distance of spotting Harry's distinctive green eyes.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

A trickle of embarrassment ran down Dumbledore's spine at the realization that he simply had no idea which boy was Harry. There were several that he thought more than likely to be him, but these quickly proved otherwise. Seamus Finnegan. Justin Finch-Fletchley. Both had fit the general phenotype that he had been looking for. At this point, he was beginning to grow concerned. Those faces he did not recognise as pure-blooded wizards were completely at odds with what he expected Harry to look like. And those few were quickly being whittled down in numbers as well.

"Potter, Harry," announced McGonagall finally.

The hall abruptly went silent as everyone, professor and student alike, scanned the remaining first years for the famed Boy-Who-Lived-And-Vanished. It did not take long, as there were only three children left to be sorted. One was a witch. The two young wizards, Ronald Weasley and Blaise Zabini, found themselves the objects of intense scrutiny; which was quick to reveal that neither of them was the boy in question.

"Potter, Harry?" McGonagall repeated, slightly louder.

The soft sound of murmurs and whispered speculation began to fill the air. While the teaching staff was professional enough, or simply experienced enough, to keep quiet their thoughts on the matter, the students were not so discerning. It did not take long before heads began to turn and questioning eyes directed themselves to where Dumbledore was sitting. But the headmaster had no answer to give.

"I think, Professor McGonagall," he finally said, "That we should continue with the rest of the Sorting."

McGonagall actually blinked in surprise at such a suggestion. Dumbledore could understand why. That Harry Potter was not present, indeed was still missing, was a matter of great concern. That he was ignoring it, even for the Sorting, however briefly, was simply astonishing. But Minerva McGonagall was made of sterner stuff than that and quickly rallied herself.

"Yes, headmaster. Of course," she said, before moving to the next name on the list.

Dumbledore leaned back in his seat, his throne, and barely noticed as the last three students were brought up and sorted. Once the ceremony had concluded and Professor McGonagall had removed the Sorting Hat, he absently waved a hand and caused the house-elves to send up the food. His welcoming speech was all but forgotten, even his witty little joke at the end. Instead, the headmaster lost himself in contemplation.

A horrible coldness had settled in the pit of his stomach and, for the first time, Dumbledore began to have doubts.

-oOo-

Culture Superlifters were widely considered to be the fastest ships in the galaxy. Certainly, none of the currently active Involved civilizations could claim to have ever beaten one in a race. This was mostly due to the fact that a Superlifter was little more than pure engine and an attached Mind. The average Cliff-class Superlifter could sustain a steady cruise velocity of one hundred and eighty-five kilolights. For brief bursts of an hour or two, it could push that figure up to an even more impressive two-twenty-one.

Right now, the *No Posted Speed Limit*, a proud and reliable Cliff-class Superlifter, was carrying Harry Potter, Diziet Sma and the drone Skaffen-Amtiskaw on a course to the Sol star system at 185,000 times the speed of light. After a week of travel, it would still be another month before they arrived and rendezvoused with the waiting GCU *It's Not My Fault*.

Inside the twelve-man module that was temporarily serving as the ship's passenger's quarters for the duration of the trip, Harry Potter was reclining in his bed and trying to make sense of the day's lessons. As part of his preparation for blending in with the people of his homeworld, Harry was having to endure a comprehensive, annotated and abridged education in Terran history, society, customs and anything else that Contact thought he might need to know.

While the history lessons were not too difficult to learn, comprehend and retain, Harry found himself struggling with many aspects of their society. Their laws in particular, which were almost as strange to him as the concept of money, were enough to cause an almost blinding headache. A small glanding of *Diffuse* would take care of that, but would not mesh very well with the already glanded *Sharp Blue* and *Focus*, which were the only things keeping him from tossing his hands in the air and declaring the whole matter a lost and hopeless cause.

The Culture, you see, had no laws. None. At all. Nowhere in all of the nine thousand years of the Culture's history, was there a single, clearly defined, written or stated law, rule, decree or regulation of any sort. In point of fact, to most Culture citizens the entire concept of laws and rules was a theoretical exercise that they were expected to study during what would be their high school years. If asked they would state that their society had evolved to a sufficient degree of civilization that they could be trusted to behave themselves, constrained by nothing more than the concept of good manners and proper behaviour.

Harry closed his eyes with a sigh and directed his room's screen to shut off. And the wars. It seemed that the people of Earth had no concept of what peace was, having been embroiled in one war or another for their entire history. In fact, it was so bad that they marked notable points of their history by whichever war they were fighting at the time. They had just finished another one. A conflict involving a good portion of the globe, including England, had entered into a perturbing conflict in a region that was euphemistically called the "Middle East". A war fought over oil of all things.

"The universe hates me," he declared unhappily.

"That's right, Harry!"

"Gah! Get off!" exclaimed Harry eyes snapping wide open, as one of his new companion drones jumped up onto the bed and then onto his lap. This would not normally have bothered the boy, save for the fact that he hadn't bothered getting dressed after his morning shower. "Grief, Sylvester! Off!"

"Sure thing, Harry!"

Harry suppressed a whimper as Sylvester bounded away. The moment the drone was clear, he clamped both hands over his crotch, more than a little relieved that the biogenetic animal had not extended its claws. He rolled onto his side and glared balefully at the drone, which had sprung off the bed and was now strutting back and forth next to it.

Sylvester was what most Terrans would describe as a house cat; black with white "socks" on all four feet. It was not a real cat, of course. It was actually one of Harry's two assigned autonomous escorts.

A combat small-drone, 2/2, that was carefully and skilfully hidden within the biogenetically engineered shell-body of a Terran feline. It had combat grade effector fields, a miniature HS laser, a secondary X-ray laser and a fully loaded pallet of 256 antimatter tipped one millimetre long nanomissiles. It also had a 0.7 level AI core brain, which meant that it wasn't all that bright. Worse still, the damned thing had an accursedly chipper personality, which had a tendency to grate on Harry's nerves. He had decided to call it Sylvester, after a character he had seen in one of the Terran animation videos he and Sma had been watching over the past week.

"Idiot."

Harry nodded in agreement and turned to his other companion, who had just declared its disdain. Perched on the tall headboard of Harry's bed, was the first combat small-drone, 1/2, currently hidden away within the biogenetic body of a Terran barn owl. Its plumage was primarily dark brown with a few white flecks dotted about its chest. Identical to its twin in almost every way, save its personality, Harry found this drone much easier to tolerate. For one thing, it didn't talk as much. As a consequence, Harry had given its designation much consideration and decided to use a good and solidly traditional Terran pet name; Butch.

"I don't suppose you know where its off-switch is, do you?" he asked.

"No," replied Butch blandly. Its personality was different from Sylvester's mostly by virtue of it not having a personality.

"Pity," muttered Harry, turning a jaundiced eye to the oblivious fake cat.

Unexpectedly, the door to Harry's rooms slid open just then, granting Sma entrance. She was wearing a pair of blue, fashionably tight shorts and nothing else. She had a bemused expression on her face, doubtless a result of the disgruntled expression she had seen Harry wearing upon her entrance. She found it highly amusing when he struggled to contain Sylvester's limitless enthusiasm.

Harry's eyes were immediately, if momentarily, drawn to her exposed breasts before rising up to her dark eyes. It was only polite, after all, to pay attention to what she was about to say – as she would not have interrupted his studies for no reason. Admiring Sma's wonderfully lithe figure, in particular her rosy nipples, would have to wait until later. Pity.

"Sma?" he asked, prompting her to speak.

"Hey, Harry," she smiled, her own gaze taking in his nude frame with a glance. "We've just received the daily data packet from the GCUs."

A trio of General Contact Units had already arrived in the Sol system and were busy uncovering the planet's secrets, of which there were a surprisingly large number. The trio had been surveying the planet with a degree of thoroughness that even the most pedantic Mind would have found impressive. The Culture's reputation for thoroughness was almost as well known as its penchant for hedonism.

What the GCUs had uncovered thus far was as impressive as it was surprising. It appeared that there was a distinct subculture existing on Terra alongside its more mundane human inhabitants. The investigation, using sensors and scanners that could track a quark through the galactic core, had detected numerous settlements that literally reeked with dual layered Grid-energy. Closer examination revealed these to be more appropriate for a mid stage-two class civilization, rather than the rest of the planet's predominately stage-three level of technology. The inhabitants appeared to be stereotypical witches and wizards.

Harry hopped off his bed and briefly considered grabbing some shorts to cover himself in. He was acutely aware that he was still only a child, just approaching the onset of puberty, and thus a little underdeveloped compared to an adult male – Sma's currently preferred bed partners. Still, she had never said anything negative about his appearance, nor did her expression suggest that she found him lacking in any way. Deciding that he

was worrying needlessly, Harry padded into the module's communal lounge and dropped into place next to Sma.

"Anything in particular you want to review?" asked Skaffen-Amtiskaw, from where it sat on the nearby kitchen counter.

"Nothing springs to mind," said Sma.

"Has any progress been made in surveillance of the... witches and wizards?" asked Harry. The three GCUs had only watched the strange beings from a distance, having yet to make any observation that wasn't initiated from orbit. There had been some discussion the previous day to begin discreet surveillance using cloaked stealth drones, adhering to the one-hundred metre approach limit.

"Not yet, but the GCU *Artificial Stupidity* has observed what appears to be a sport of some sort, accompanied by a live broadcast on something analogous to a radio wave, only based in the hyperspace skein," replied the drone.

"Was it able to decipher the broadcast?" asked Sma.

"Yes," confirmed Skaffen-Amtiskaw. Its aura field flickered a displeased brown. "Apparently the sport is called 'Quidditch' and the game was being played between two professional teams; the Hollyhead Harpies and the Chudley Cannons."

"Do you have any recordings of the game? Can we watch?" asked Harry, curious as to what forms of recreation his fellow wizards might play.

"Again, yes," confirmed the drone.

"Can you put it one the screen then?"

"Certainly, but I should warn you first."

"Warn us? About what?" asked Sma. "This sport isn't a bloody one, is it?"

"Not particularly," admitted Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

"It's not like cricket - where a single match lasts five days?"

"Grief, no. It's just..."

"Just what, Skaffy?" prompted Harry.

Skaffen-Amtiskaw's aura field flickered rapidly between brown, grey and orange. Finally, it spoke. "The game is played in the air."

Sma and Harry exchanged a puzzled look. Harry turned to the drone and asked, "So? That's not unusual."

"On broomsticks. They ride around on broomsticks."

-oOo-

It had been a month since the start of term. The first of September had come and gone, and it was now the first of October. An entire month without any sign or hint of Harry Potter's whereabouts. Dumbledore was at a loss as to why Harry had not yet arrived at Hogwarts. The only indication that the missing boy was still on the move was the continued shifting of the directional compass, which had now moved nearly six whole degrees from its long standing medium.

Dumbledore could not decide how he felt about this. His emotions were cycling between disappointment, apprehension, expectation and a gut wrenching fear that he was completely misinterpreting events and that Harry was merely changing his location, as he had four years before, instead of coming to Hogwarts. He had been so certain that Harry was going to arrive in time for the Sorting; returning to the magical world as the proverbial prodigal son.

The media and political uproar had been calamitous, almost but not quite as bad as when it was revealed that Harry had vanished without a trace. Minister Fudge was becoming increasingly annoying, no doubt egged on by Lucius Malfoy. The Daily Prophet was running a series of articles - led by Rita Skeeter - lambasting Dumbledore and anyone even remotely associated with him. His only consolation was that her forked tongue was also striking out against the Ministry; accusing them of almost as much negligence as she accused the headmaster.

At Hogwarts, thankfully, things were much quieter. Amongst the students, if nobody else. There had been rampant speculation, of course, as well as the usual gossip and rumour-mongering. Some of the stories that did the rounds were hilariously amusing, principally due to their utter inanity.

Depending on whom you asked, Harry Potter had forgone attending Hogwarts in favour of Durmstrang, Beauxbatons and even the Salem Institute. Then there was the claim that he was already at Hogwarts, but under an impenetrable disguise. He had been sorted into either Gryffindor, Slytherin or the previously undiscovered house of Merlin.

But, after the first couple of weeks, it had died down to the point that most of the students had seemingly forgotten all about their missing classmate. It was only in the staffroom where Harry's name still came up in conversation.

Professor McGonagall made a point of asking Dumbledore about Harry's condition at least twice a day. It was a relief that she was now so restrained. That first week had been especially trying, as she would make the trip up to the headmaster's office at every available moment. For the first time since beginning her tenure at Hogwarts, the Transfiguration professor had been late for one of her classes.

And if McGonagall's insistence was annoying, then Snape's smug vindication was infuriating. Dumbledore was, he had to admit, beginning to lose his patience with the potions master. The man had never been popular with the rest of the staff, truth be told the other professors barely tolerated him, but his constant gloating was causing tempers to fray. The only good things to come of it all was that Severus was in too good a mood to bother taking his usual slew of points from the other three houses.

Sitting down for lunch in the Great Hall, Dumbledore gazed out at the assembled students. They seemed so carefree, utterly unaware of the dangers that lurked just beyond their perceptions. The Philosopher's Stone was secured away beyond the third-floor corridor. Various defences, traps and trials were laid out, ostensibly to keep it from falling into the wrong hands. Professor Quirrell was biding his time...

The sound of raised voices drew his attention to a spot near the Gryffindor table. Yes, Draco Malfoy and Ronald Weasley were locking horns yet again. The two boys were almost incapable of being in the same room without entering an altercation of some sort. Dumbledore had been hoping that they would resolve their differences, but that seemed more and more unlikely to ever come about. He briefly considered speaking to their respective heads of house, but decided not to. Severus would, as was his wont, do nothing to curtail Draco's actions, and having Minerva restrain Ronald's retaliation would only lead to a festering resentment within the redhead. The only hope was for them to sort it out themselves.

Dumbledore sighed and turned his attention to the food arrayed in front of him. He began to help himself to a portion of roast lamb and Yorkshire pudding. He had put so much effort into arranging a suitable test of young Harry's abilities and yet it seemed likely that the boy would not have an opportunity to face it. None of the Stone's protections were impossibly difficult to circumvent, given a little power, skill and creative thinking. This was exactly as the headmaster intended.

But without the Boy-Who-Lived-And-Vanished, this only served to make the Stone that much more vulnerable to Voldemort and his servant. The headmaster began to contemplate the idea of properly enhancing the various defensive measures, but was unsure of how to do so without drawing Quirrell's attention. It was too late, now that the man was residing within the castle.

Dumbledore loosed another tired sigh and tried to put the matter out of his mind, at least until the end of lunch. He hoped that Harry would arrive soon. The boy's absence was disrupting everything.

-oOo-

In the main observation lounge of the Mountain class General Contact Unit *It's Not My Fault*, Harry observed the tiny blue, green and white sphere that hung suspended in the black. It was such a small and fragile looking thing, his home planet. The orbital of S'Jet, where he had lived for his first six years in the Culture, had over a hundred and twenty times the surface area of Terra. Stafl, his home for the past four years, was slightly smaller, but still had almost a hundred times more space for its many billions of inhabitants, be they human or drone.

It had been a week since the *No Posted Speed Limit* had arrived in orbit and transferred its passengers to the GCU. It had then sped off into the ether, on its way to join up with the *GSV Sufficiently Advanced Technology*. Harry, Sma, Skaffen-Amtiskaw and the two combat small-drones had moved into their suites aboard the *It's Not My Fault*, and enjoyed an interesting evening getting to know the ship's crew.

Harry was concerned to note that barely two months of exposure to Terran civilization had been enough to drive the lot of them, three hundred men, women and drones, into a state of burgeoning insanity. Apparently, as told by various parties, the crew had discovered Terran fiction. More specifically; Terran science-fiction. Somewhere along the line the crew had become focused and then divided upon two of the more prominent of these fictional universes.

Sma was almost as incredulous about this behaviour as Harry was, but had enough experience in the eccentricities of GCU crews to hide it better. Skaffen-Amtiskaw had loudly proclaimed that the Terran's madness was evidently contagious, before settling down, its aura field a rosy pink, and enjoying the show put on by the ship's crew.

The one camp, who called themselves the 'Fleet-ers, were obsessing about a series of television programs called Star Trek. Their opposition, calling themselves the Rebel Alliance, had latched onto a trilogy of video movies known as Star Wars. It was impossible to talk with anyone on the ship without the phrases "Live long and prosper" and "May the Force be with you" being throw into the conversation. Even more irritating was not the raging debate over which was the better creation, but the petitions to have the *It's Not My Fault* change its name. The 'Fleet-ers want to rename the ship the "*U.S.S. Enterprise*", while the Rebels want to call it the "*Millennium Falcon*".

The GCU itself seemed to find the entire mess all too amusing, and had developed the habit of modifying its remote-drones to resemble the starships in question. Whenever the two types of remote-drones happened to enter the same room at the same type, they invariably engaged in mock combat – holographic weaponry blazing between them. None of the *U.S.S. Enterprises* or *Millennium Falcons* had managed to win any of these battles, but the crew were hoping that the GCU would eventually pick a side.

In Harry's personal opinion, the only good thing about it was the various costumes that some of the women wore. That they all wore, actually, though it was the women that caught the young man's eyes. The male 'Fleet-ers, in honour of their chosen television series, would run around in black trousers and bright, primary coloured shirts. The women invariably wore similar uniforms, but had impressively short skirts rather than trousers. Harry found himself appreciating more than a few stocking-clad legs.

The Rebels, in contrast, had a much broader range of costumes to choose from. Orange jumpsuits, voluminous royal robes, Jedi (whatever those were) tunics and much, much more. One man insisted on wearing an all encompassing black suit and cape with a massively oversized helmet. Harry tried to avoid him whenever possible. The deep, heavy breathing was strangely disturbing.

There was one Rebel woman, however, who was running around in a skimpy gold bikini. The contrast against her dark, nightwood coloured skin, was very enticing. She lost points, however, by insisting on calling him a, "Scruffy looking nerf-herder". Harry had no idea what a nerf was, let alone how to herd one, but he resented being called scruffy. He couldn't help the unruly nature of his hair and felt it was impolite of her to draw attention to it.

“Peace and long life, Mr. Potter.”

Harry turned to the blue-uniformed man that had walked up to him and levelled a glare that, if looks could kill, would have seriously damaged the *It's Not My Fault*. Taking in to account the fact that the average General Contact Unit could survive anything short of a supernova or a black hole, the planet below would have been reduced to a cloud of gravel.

The man either ignored it entirely, or was completely oblivious to it.

“Mr. Fors,” acknowledged Harry after a beat. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Stemli Fors grinned and nodded, “Diziet asked me to call you for her. She and Dn. Skaffen-Amtiskaw want to finalize your plans for the trip down to Terra tomorrow.”

Harry smiled in return, secretly and silently cursing the man in all ten of the Terran languages he had learnt during the voyage from Staff. Diziet had obviously, in a fit of mischief, sent the man to fetch him. She could have simply used her lace to contact him, or even had the *It's Not My Fault* do it. The only reason she had to use Fors as a go-between was the fact that she knew it would irritate him. The only thing that would have annoyed him even more was if she had slept with the man. Fortunately, Sma had been more discerning with her bed mates – though Harry still felt a twinge of jealousy each time he thought about it.

“Thank you,” he said politely, while switching from Spanish to Chinese in his unvoiced cursing. “Is she in her rooms?”

“Yes, I believe so,” nodded Fors.

“Then I'll be off. Thanks again.”

“You're welcome, Harry. Live long and prosper.”

Harry somehow managed to keep a polite smile on his face. He nodded graciously, returned the farewell (complete with funny hand sign), and waved goodbye as he tried to flee the man's presence as fast as possible without seeming rude.

~ *Sma*? he called through his lace, having left the lounge.

~ *Harry*, replied Sma. ~ *Did Stemli pass along my message?*

~ *Oh, he did, he did*, Harry confirmed. ~ *You're evil, did you knowthat?*

Sma's only reply was a tinkle of laughter, which translated surprisingly well through the neural lace connection. Harry felt his annoyance melt away in the face of his guardian's somewhat twisted sense of humour. Within a matter of minutes he had arrived at Sma's apartments, located next to his own. As she was expecting him, he entered without bothering to announce himself. He found her and Skaffen-Amtiskaw in the lounge, having apparently just finished playing a game of Stricken. The metre edged web cube hung suspended over the lounge table, still showing the final move. From what Harry could see of it, he would give the victory to Skaffen-Amtiskaw, after a game that lasted slightly under an hour.

“So, I'm evil, am I?” she asked as he stepped into the room.

“At least you didn't send Lord Dark Helmet to fetch me,” retorted Harry.

“Only because I couldn't find him on such short notice.”

“What's the plan for our little excursion?”

“That's what we're hoping to decide now,” said the drone. “There are a fair few options for us to choose.”

“I thought we'd be going straight to the school,” said Harry, sitting down next to Sma.

The GCUs had made a comprehensive survey of the planet over the past two months and had built up a reasonable understanding of the magical substratum of Terran humans, in particular those living in Great Britain. It had not taken them long to discover the location of Hogwarts castle, despite its being hidden beneath an odd form of hyperspace distortion. Surveillance of the school had not yielded a wealth of information, but the nearby village of Hogsmeade; which was the largest purely magical settlement on the island, had greatly broadened their knowledge. It had also convinced most of the Contact Section that witches and wizards were amongst the most illogical creatures in the galaxy.

“Maybe at the end of the day,” Sma explained. “Truth is; none of the letters we have really provide much in the way of instructions. The letter we found with you only gave a brief explanation of how you were orphaned. The Hogwarts letter only said that you'd been accepted to study there. We could just turn up on their front doorstep and knock, I suppose, but the Minds think that would be unnecessarily provocative.”

Harry leaned back against the couch and nodded in thoughtfully agreement. As a Potential Referrer, he had a better idea than most as to the way Minds worked. Saving Hogwarts for last, after investigating other notable locations beforehand, was just the sort of thing he would consider doing, if he were in charge.

“Where do they want us to go first?” he asked. “The ‘scene of the crime’, as it were... or where the two of you found me?”

“By that I gather you mean Godric's Hollow and Privet Drive,” asked Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

Of course,” confirmed Harry. “I blew up the first and was ceremoniously dumped at the second.”

“Accurate as ever, if somewhat crudely put,” the drone agreed.

“Our Incident Coordinator wants us to visit Privet Drive first. After that we’ll go to Godric’s Hollow. We want to see what your own talents make of both locations. After that, we’ll proceed to Hogsmeade and then to Hogwarts,” summarised Sma.

“Who is that, anyway? Our IC, I mean? It’s a GSV obviously.”

“Yes,” confirmed Skaffen-Amtiskaw. “The *Size Isn’t Everything*.”

“One of the System class ships?”

“Yes. Sma and I have worked with it before.”

“Is it in the volume, or working over distance?”

“It’s a little over eleven thousand years away. A month travel at cruise, two and a half weeks at a dash.”

“Hmm.”

“So, are you okay with this?” asked Sma. “Privet Drive; then Godric’s Hollow and then Hogsmeade and Hogwarts?”

Harry considered briefly and then nodded. “Works for me.” He glanced at the Stricken web cube and asked, “How was the game? Last long?”

Skaffen-Amtiskaw glowed a bright sapphire and declared, “She gave me quite the challenge today. The game lasted nearly an hour.”

“Bloody drone,” muttered Sma. “Don’t you ever lose?”

“Not to you.”

Harry smiled softly. “That’s what I thought.”

-oOo-

Breakfast was a dreary affair. Or at least, that was Dumbledore’s opinion on the matter. Most meals were these days, mostly due to the fact that there was still no indication that Harry Potter was ever going to turn up. Today was Halloween and tomorrow would mark two months since the start of the school year.

Not feeling especially hungry, Dumbledore helped himself to a single slice of buttered toast. He considered slathering on some marmalade, but found himself unable to produce enough energy to care. Harry’s continued absence of beginning to affect the headmaster’s health. The simple truth was that he was depressed. Most of the staff had noticed, though only Minerva and Poppy had said anything about it.

“You really should have more to eat than just that, Albus,” McGonagall quietly prodded from her seat beside him.

“Would that I could, Minerva,” he replied, “but I fear that my appetite has deserted me.”

“Still no change then?” she asked.

Dumbledore bit into his toast and munched thoughtfully. “Not for this last week, no. There is a great deal of variation in the location readings, not unlike what happened shortly after Harry first disappeared, but nothing to hint as to his location.”

McGonagall nodded and sipped her morning tea. “What do you think it means?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” Dumbledore confessed. “The scrying magicks have always been monotonously reliable, though the story they have told is one utterly impossible. Now, however, they have managed to completely befuddle me. Not even the strongest magic could allow Harry to move in the way they indicate.”

“What do those gadgets of yours say, Albus?” asked Filius Flitwick, who had been listening quietly to their conversation.

“I am at a loss to explain it, Filius. The directional compass is making a complete revolution every six hours. Likewise, the distance pendulum swings between a minimum of a hundred miles and ten thousand; again, every six hours.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the spoiled brat was doing it deliberately.”

All eyes turned to Professor Snape, who was almost viciously attacking his morning omelette. It required a great deal of effort for Dumbledore not to groan. When would the man learn to keep his opinion about Harry to himself and shut up? Or better yet, grow up.

Unsurprisingly, Professor McGonagall rallied to Harry’s defence and replied, “But of course, Severus. Heaven only knows how much satisfaction Mr. Potter must take in frustrating you so. Why, it’s only natural to for him to act in such a way; against a man he’s never even see or heard of.”

“How silly of us not to have realized that,” Filius teasingly added.

Snape glared balefully at them both, but had enough common sense not to try and retaliate. Instead, he returned to his meal, jabbing his fork into the

omelette hard enough that it screeched loudly against the plate.

Dumbledore sighed and took another mouthful of toast. "Regardless of the confusion," he said, after swallowing, "I do hold out hope in the fact that things seem to have come full circle. Who knows, perhaps today..."

"Don't make me laugh, headmaster," said Snape. "On Halloween? Ten years to the day that the boy's parents were killed?"

"Stranger things have happened, Severus," Dumbledore countered.

"Believe what you will, Albus," said Snape, abandoning his breakfast and rising from his seat. "Personally, I think we're all much better off without the little boy celebrity and his, no doubt greatly overblown, ego."

"I will never understand what you see in that man, Albus," muttered McGonagall as Snape departed.

"Severus has my complete trust and faith, Minerva," replied Dumbledore.

"Yours, perhaps, headmaster," Flitwick retorted. "The rest of us are content to remain sceptical."

"I admit that he is not an easy person to be around."

"No, Albus, he most certainly is not. And you won't find many that think otherwise."

Dumbledore, following in Snape's footsteps, abandoned his breakfast, such as it was, and excused himself from the staff table. As he left, he said, "I do not ask you to like the man. But I do expect for you to tolerate him."

It was McGonagall who answered for the remaining professors, saying plainly, "We have and we shall continue to do so. But it will not last forever, Albus. Not even you can expect such blind devotion."

Exiting the Great Hall and slowly winding his way back to his office; Dumbledore had to admit, if only to himself, that he was slowly losing the war when it came to Severus Snape. It would have been much easier to accomplish had the man in question actually bothered to comport himself in a vaguely civil manner, but Snape seemed to live for the opportunity to make subtle, and not to subtle, barbs against his colleagues. That most of the student body openly detested him, aside from his own house, did nothing to help matters.

"Almond Nougat," he said to the guardian gargoyle.

Riding the winding staircase up to his office, he contemplated what to do. Perhaps an owl. Harry's position relative to Hogwarts had changed dramatically from its once steady course. It seemed reasonable to assume that whatever wards protected him were affecting the instrument's readings. Perhaps the closer proximity is what was confusing the results to a degree. There was at least some hope that an owl would be able to find him now.

Arriving outside his office, Dumbledore opened the door and crossed to his desk. Sinking into his plush chair, he looked to Fawkes' perch, but the phoenix was nowhere to be seen. Eyeing the silver bowl on his desk, he almost reached for a lemon sherbet, but ultimately decided against it. Not even the bittersweet flavour of his favourite sweet would help his current mood. He sat for several minutes, staring blankly into space, before a sense of restlessness overcame him. Not really wanting to do anything, he reluctantly left the comfort of his seat and began to wander about his office.

He brushed a hand along the spines of the books arrayed along one bookshelf. None of the titles caught his eye. He had read them all many times. Ah, the antique blunderbuss his old friend Dedalus Diggle had given him for his hundredth birthday. Still in working order. And there, yes, the certificate for his Order of Merlin, First Class. He kept the actual medal itself in his Gringotts vault. He preferred not to think of the circumstances of how he came to be awarded it. His pensieve. Perhaps he should take a dip? Remember those bright and better days of his youth, before Gellert, before... damn.

Not for the first time, Dumbledore cursed how easily his past intruded upon his present. He could never escape it.

Coming to his 'Harry Potter cabinet', he let his gaze run idly over the various instruments. As he expected; no change. Harry was hale and hearty. His emotions a tad more excited than usual. And look; he was currently a little over four hundred and twenty miles from Hogwarts, south-south-west. That would be about where Little Whinging and number four Privet Drive were located...

Dumbledore had actually taken three steps away from the cabinet before it registered. He spun around, almost tripping over his robes, and scurried back for a second and closer look. Yes, by Merlin, yes! He hurried to his fireplace and grabbed frantically at the floo powder. He tossed an entire handful into the flames, several times more than needed, but he didn't care.

"Professor McGonagall!" he called insistently. "Minerva McGonagall!"

A moment later his deputy's head appeared in the fireplace. She looked up at him in open concern. "Headmaster? What's wrong?"

"Minerva! I've found him!"

-oOo-

"Please, tell me the rest of the planet isn't this monotonous," complained Harry, as the he, Sma and the three drones arrived at Privet Drive.

"English, Harry," Skaffen-Amtiskaw reminded him.

“Fine,” Harry rolled his eyes and switched languages. “Well? Is it?”

“No, I think it’s just this street,” Sma shook her head. She looked up and down the rows of identical two-story houses and sighed. “Ten years and I’d swear that nothing has changed. Not even a single blade of grass.”

“Wonderful,” Harry grumbled, stepping around Sylvester, who had paused to investigate flowerbed.

As they walked, Harry mimicked Sma’s actions and regarded the street critically. It had, as she said, remained almost unchanged from that night tens years before. Harry had no real recollection of it, save the odd dream or two, but had witnessed and participated in the VR recording of the event. Once the GCU *Short Circuit* had realized what had happened in Godric’s Hollow, it diligently recorded everything its sensors witnessed. It had tracked baby Harry from the destroyed wreck of his family home, via a flying motorcycle, all the way to Little Whinging. By that time it had moved into a much better position to observe events and had been able to use its effectors to monitor the situation in multiple dimensions, which later provided a perfectly accurate recording.

Harry had first experienced it when he was six, while still living on S’ Jet orbital. He had viewed it several times since then, always accompanied by Sma and usually with one or two Minds. The *Short Circuit*’s effectors had easily been able to record the sounds to go with the visual actions. He knew that the large man that had carried him on the motorcycle was Hagrid. He knew that the old man was Dumbledore and the stern looking woman was McGonagall.

The Culture had learnt a good deal from what the *Short Circuit* had recorded. Harry, Sma and dozens of Minds had listened to and reviewed the conversation that had transpired before Harry had been abandoned on the doorstep. Every word had been analysed, every nuance examined and every expression dissected. It was only a matter of bad luck that the GCU had not been able to listen in on Dumbledore and McGonagall before Hagrid had descended to join them.

Returning his attention to the pavement their little group was walking on, Harry once again noticed the slight spring in his step. He might have thought that it was a result of his excitement, but knew that it was actually because of fractionally lower gravity. It wasn’t a lot, only a few percent, but enough that he had immediately noticed the difference.

The fact that he was actually standing on a planet was something that left him with a faintly surreal feeling. That there was a visible horizon was more than a little disconcerting. Such a limited line of sight! Harry had not been within forty million kilometres of a planet, or any other natural body, since he had been brought into the Culture. Both S’ Jet and Staff were orbitals; massive hoops of super-dense exotic material that only mimicked a planetary surface. There was little or nothing natural about them.

With his attention focused, however briefly, on his feet, Harry became aware of his snug fitting gelfield suit. Being one of the Culture’s technological wonders, it was very easy to forget that he was even wearing it. The suit, a Culture Gelfield Contact / Protection Suit, Mk 13, was to be Harry’s first line of defence during his stay on Terra. At least until everyone was confident that he would not unexpectedly find himself in harm’s way.

The gelfield suit covered his body like a second skin, never more than a centimetre thick and averaging only half that. It extended from his neck down and fully encompassed both hands and feet, though could readily adjust itself to cover Harry’s head as well, doing so within less than quarter of a microsecond, should it be required. The suit could allow its human wearer to survive indefinitely in hard vacuum or withstand pressures equivalent to the bottom of a deep ocean. Due to its complexity, it also possessed a node-distributed quasi-sentient brain, with a 0.9 intelligence rating.

“All right there, Harry?” asked Sma, having noticed that her charge was distracted.

“Fine, Sma, perfectly fine,” he replied. “I was just thinking about what I have on under all these clothes.”

It went without saying that the gelfield suit was far beyond anything Terran science and technology could produce. This dictated that the suit remain as unobtrusive as possible, so as to avoid any awkward questions. It was currently matching Harry’s skin tone, making it almost impossible to spot while he wore regular clothing over it.

At the moment he was dressed in a pair of sneakers, which he considered to be a very odd name for footwear, and trousers of a rough blue fabric called demin jeans. He wore a plain white, button up shirt, underneath a grey and black pullover sweater, made from the shorn fur of a local animal. On top of all this was a brown jacket of faux leather, which he was expected to wear to ward off the chilly weather. Of course, the gelfield suit meant that Harry was never anything less than perfectly comfortable, regardless of the temperature, but it was all for show.

Sma, striding alongside him, was dressed in an elegant navy blue business suit, a jacket and trouser affair, topped off by a cream-coloured coat that reached down to her ankles. She also had on a pair of dark sunglasses, despite the overcast sky. Unlike Harry, she was not safely ensconced within a gelfield suit. That gave him some cause for concern, but there was some relief in the face that the GCU *It’s Not My Fault* was constantly monitoring their mind-states via their neural laces.

Harry absently ran a thumb over his belt buckle. This was the next component of his varied protection. With a thought from Harry, the front panel of the buckle would detach, unfold to twice its current length, and then proceed to kill or destroy whatever he directed it to. More than likely at speeds the human eye would have difficulty following. Knife-missiles were as renowned for their speed as for their lethality. This one in particular, given to Harry during their stopover aboard the GSV *Thorough But... Unreliable*, had a 0.8 level AI brain, meaning that it could accomplish a great deal without explicit instruction.

Added to that was the combined Butch and Sylvester combat small-drones, as well as Skaffen-Amtiskaw. While the small-drones were both dedicated killing machines, each capable of levelling a small neighbourhood... like, say, Privet Drive... Sma’s personal escort drone was no slouch either. Skaffen-Amtiskaw was lacking laser and nanomissiles, but it did have the usual effector fields and an additional compliment of three slaved knife-missiles.

Harry wondered if any single human had ever been so well protected; short of having a Culture GOU watching over them.

“Well, here we are,” announced Sma, drawing Harry’s attention back to the present. He looked up and found that they were standing by the driveway leading up to house number four. A glance to one side revealed that Butch had settled down from his overhead flight and was perched on a nearby streetlight. Sylvester was not far away, prowling inquisitively through the garden of number two.

“These people seem to like tall and narrow,” said Harry.

“They don’t have much room to spread out, so they build upwards,” explained Skaffen-Amtiskaw. The drone was projecting a disguise field image that gave it the appearance of an executive briefcase. Sma had been “carrying” it ever since they had left the module that had brought them to the planet surface.

“So,” Harry ran a critical eye over the house, “this is where I was supposed to have lived, huh?”

“You were expecting something else?” asked Sma.

“Maybe a little,” said Harry. “I mean, I’ve seen this place dozens of times, in the VR recordings, but this time I’m actually physically here. I was... I don’t know, expecting it to be a little more real or something.”

“Do you want to knock on the door? Or should I do it for you?”

“I’ll do it. They’re my relatives.”

“I’m sure they’ll be delighted to finally meet you,” said Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

“That’s right, Harry!” chirped Sylvester, brushing itself languidly against Sma’s legs.

“Damnable fool, be quiet!” hissed Skaffen-Amtiskaw. “Cats are *not* supposed to be able to talk!”

“Nor are suitcases,” said Sma softly.

Sucking in a deep breath, and idly wondering why he was even bothering to do this, Harry strode up to the front door of number four Privet Drive. He stood there for a long time, nervously rubbing his hands together. He had never once given any thought to the possibility that he would one day meet someone, anyone, that had an actual blood relation to him. Yet, here he was, literally on the threshold of doing so.

A hand settled softly on his shoulder and he turned to see that Sma was standing beside him, lending her support. Skaffen-Amtiskaw was there as well, still in its disguise, and resting silently at their feet. Butch and Sylvester, not fully sentient and not as familiar with him as the others, remained a short distance away on the pavement.

Turning back to the door, he briefly considered glanding some *Calm*, to steady his nerves. If ever there was a time for such artificial control of his emotions, now was most certainly it. But, taking another deep breath and trying to quell his churning stomach, Harry gathered his courage and decided to do it on his own. There really was no need for more than that. After all; Sma and Skaffen-Amtiskaw were with him. He needed nothing else.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Having rapped firmly on the plain wood door, Harry settled back, resting all of his weight on his heels and clasped his hands together behind his back. Sma continued to keep a reassuring hand on his shoulder. There was nothing left to do now, but wait. After a minute or so, he could hear the sounds of someone approaching. There was the rattle of a lock being released and then the door swung open, revealing a skinny and dour-looking woman, dressing in clothes almost as bland as the rest of her figure.

“Yes? What do you... you... you!”

Somewhat surprised that the woman appeared to recognise him, Harry tried to introduce himself. “Good day, Miss,” he said, taking care to enunciate his English properly. “Are you by any chance Petunia Dursley? I’m—”

“Potter!” the woman interrupted, her eyes now wide and her face a sickly pallor. “POTTER!”

“Er... yes, I’m—”

“No! NO!” the woman’s voice rose to a shrill screech. “You can’t be here! You can’t! You’re dead! Dead! DEAD! THEY TOLD US YOU WERE DEAD! YOU AND LILY BOTH! DEAD!”

“I’m not—”

“He killed you! HE KILLED YOU!” screamed Petunia hysterically.

“But I—”

All of Harry’s attempts to speak to the woman were cut short by her increasingly loud rant. Before he could manage to get a word in edgewise, Petunia slammed the door in his face, close enough that he jerked back in surprise. It did nothing to stop her screams, which were still perfectly audible to those outside, if somewhat reduced in volume.

I won't let you take me too! I won't! Or my Dudders! You won't have my baby!"

Harry turned back to his companions, utterly nonplussed by his last living relative's reaction to seeing him. Sma looked to be just as surprised, though there was a faint hint of amusement in her dark eyes. Harry could hardly fault her for it; as he also found Petunia's actions inexplicably strange.

"Funny," said Skaffen-Amtiskaw from its place on the ground. Unable to use its aura field while disguised, it allowed the faux leather of its disguise field to briefly change to a rich pink, before settling back to a plain glossy black. "You look very healthy for someone that's supposed to be dead, Harry."

"That letter you found on the doorstep with me," said Harry thoughtfully, already forming an idea of what had just happened. "It said that my parents were called James and Lily Potter, right?"

"Right," confirmed Sma. She looked him over. "Obviously there must be some resemblance."

"To my father," agreed Harry, "as he's the one she compared me to."

"It must be a remarkable likeness," noted Skaffen-Amtiskaw, "for her to react so strongly."

"So, now what?" asked Harry, looking to his guardians for direction.

"I don't think we'll be learning much here, if Petunia Dursley's reaction is anything to go by," said Sma as she led Harry back to the pavement in front of the house, where Butch and Sylvester were waiting patiently. "I suppose we'll have to look for answers somewhere else. Either in Godric's Hollow at Hogwarts itself."

"I suppose," agreed Harry. "Perhaps it's for the best. No emotional entanglements."

"Let's get back to the module then; it can fly us there," said Sma, linking her with Harry's as they started a slow trek back to the nearby park. They had walked barely ten metres when they suddenly found themselves surrounded.

The two humans and Skaffen-Amtiskaw were understandably surprised when a dozen people in robes appeared out of nowhere, all pointing wooden sticks at them. The two small-drones, Sylvester and Butch were slightly less surprised, but only because they were not as fully capable of experiencing emotion. Sheer luck, and a hurried order via Sma's lace, was the only thing that prevented the Order of the Phoenix from being utterly annihilated in that moment.

Harry summed up the experience with a simple and eloquent, "Fuck me."

The various witches and wizards present had no idea how to respond.

TBC...

Author's Notes: First and foremost; my figures for the number of students at Hogwarts are complete and utter thumb sucks. I made them up. Accurate to canon or not; I don't care, so don't bother ragging me about it (I got enough of that about *Backwards Compatible's* plasma rifle).

And now a few notes on Sol-Terrasa Harry Potter dam Marenhide. I suppose this falls very much under the argument of Nature vs. Nurture. Suffice to say, this Harry has been nurtured in a way completely different to anyone on Earth.

Perhaps most importantly is the fact that the Culture, despite its ability to destroy planets and suns, is a society where, for the most part, aggression and violence are somewhat foreign concepts. This stems partly from their language, Marain, which was specifically designed to be lacking those very concepts. Even the concepts of possession and owner are of greatly reduced importance. Because of this, Harry himself will be very unlikely to resort to violence – at least not deliberately.

He is also free of the normal "human" prejudices found here on Earth, though as will be seen he will have his unique prejudices – most notably a definite superiority complex over us poor technological and social barbarians. However, he is aware of this and does try to moderate his complaints about the backwards savages.

In regards to Harry's sexuality, at this point he's merely a boy with an impressive amount of experimentation under his belt. He had not had sex yet and will not until sometime in either his fourth or fifth-year at Hogwarts. There will be a good deal of confusion between Harry and his classmates over this, at first, but Harry will quickly learn (if not fully comprehend) Terran moral standards.

Too understand this; you must understand that in the Culture, anything goes. There are no social taboos. Homosexuality is just as common as Heterosexuality, and just about everyone would be considered fully-fledged bisexuals. This stems mostly from the fact that Culture humans are capable of changing sex at will, not unlike Tonk's metamorphmagus abilities.

The process, as described by Banks, is initiated by entering a trance-like state (presumable taught to them as children) and then setting their Residual Self Image (a term I borrow from the Matrix) from male to female, or the reverse. This causes their bodies to begin to change, over a period of about a year. The average Culture human will change gender and back at least once during their lifetime and will generally bare at least one child while living as a female.

Another very important aspect of the Culture is that marriage, while not completely unknown, is a very, very, very rare occurrence. In fact, most Culture humans consider it to be a somewhat quaint and barbaric practice; better suited for less advanced civilizations (namely us). The closest they might come to marriage is a state of serial monogamy – meaning that they will restrict themselves to only their partner for the duration of their

relationship.

Harry is somewhat different from the average Culture child, in that he had spent most of his childhood in the presence of adults, drones and Minds. As such he has a slightly more mature outlook than most (monkey see, monkey do). However, he is still a child at heart and I will try to show this when possible. It is also important to remember that Harry has been spoiled rotten for as long as he can remember. He is very used to getting what he wants – mostly thanks to the Culture's ability to provide anything without much appreciable effort.

I do intend for him to interact with his canon friends and foes, but his relationships with them will be completely different. I wouldn't want to spoil any surprises, but don't expect Ron or Draco to fall into their traditional roles. And don't expect them to be reversed either. Oddly enough, I don't see his relationship with Hermione being much different. There may or may not be any sexual tension there, I haven't decided yet.

Well, can't really think of anything more to say.

Oh, and regarding the small fan-war between Star Trek and Star Wars; I actually based this from Banks' novel *State of the Art*, wherein one crewmember aboard the GCU observing the Earth makes an impassioned speech about why he should be voted as the ship's Captain. It was simply the most hilarious thing I have ever read, and strangely enough something that Culture GCU crews tend to do.

Culture Shock Encounters

Title: Culture Shock

Author: Ruskbyte

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Summary: Harry Potter has just received his Hogwarts letter, but really doesn't want to go. After all, who would want to live on a *planet* of all things? Especially one where the inhabitants still think nuclear energy is an advanced technology. And let's not forget the 42,000 light year commute.

/oOo\

Chapter Five

Encounters

\oOo/

"Harry? Harry Potter, my dear boy, it is you!"

Harry looked over to the old man that had spoken. This, he knew, was Albus Dumbledore; headmaster of Hogwarts. The man had a string of other titles behind his name, most of them utterly incomprehensible to the Culture. Nothing in the English language could explain exactly what a Mugwump was. There was, however, one thing about Dumbledore that made him an object of intense curiosity on Harry's part. He was the one that had decided, apparently on a whim, to leave a freshly orphaned baby on a doorstep, ten years ago.

The man was dressed in what was apparently standard wizarding attire; a set of colourful robes and a cloak. The ensemble was bright and cheerful enough that it would not have drawn a second glance in the Culture. From what Harry understood, by Terran standards, it was glaringly flamboyant. The other most noticeable thing about Dumbledore was his beard; a fully silver curtain that would likely have reached his knees, were it not tucked into his belt.

He was staring at Harry with what seemed to be a shocked expression, though there were hints of a plethora of other thoughts flitting about behind his twinkling blue eyes. The boy in question had a feeling that this was only a partly honest reaction, that already the man was beginning to observe and analyse. He resolved to take great care when dealing with him. Harry briefly turned his attention to the two figures on either side of Dumbledore.

The first was a stern looking woman, dressed in dark green formal robes. He immediately recognised her as Minerva McGonagall, the woman who had been present when the headmaster had left Harry and his letter on the Dursley's doorstep. As with Dumbledore, her expression was one of shock at the most and surprise at the least. She was also looking a bit on the pale side and Harry could just make out a small amount of sway in her stance. Clearly she was feeling faint. Combined with Dumbledore's somewhat milder reaction, Harry took this as confirmation that he bore a distinct resemblance to his deceased father.

Standing on the headmaster's other side, was a pallid and equally stern looking man. His clothing was all black, without a hint of colour anywhere. His hair too was black and glistened slightly with what Harry hoped was some sort of artificial gel or other hair fastening compound. Even the man's eyes were black and they were currently focused on Harry with disturbing intensity. He had, at first, worn a calm and aloof expression. That had shifted and changed after he had the time to get a good look at Harry. Now, his features were twisted into a sharp sneer. Harry knew without a doubt that this dark man held no great love for him.

The rest of those present were an eclectic mix of people. Predominantly male, but that was not unexpected in this society. Observation by the orbiting GCUs had shown the so-called witches and wizards to be slightly more gender biased than the rest of the planet, though they hid it well. One man in particular caught Harry's eye. He looked as if he had decided to wrestle with a rabid furling and barely escaped with his life.

Turning back to Dumbledore, Harry saw that the old man had lowered the hand holding his stick. Despite this, the others remained ready. There was tension in the air, which was only growing stronger with each passing moment. With a slight motion of his hand to Sma, to let her know his intentions, Harry took a step forward and addressed the headmaster.

"Let me guess," Harry drawled. "You thought I was dead."

The thought never crossed my mind,” Dumbledore replied, having by now recovered from his momentary shock. The headmaster paused and once again looked Harry up and down. The boy was the very splitting image of a young James Potter, so much so that they could have been mistaken for twins. His eyes, however, were very much his mother’s; unhindered by any spectacle lenses and a unique shade of vibrant green. He was taller than Dumbledore had expected. It was not easy to tell, but he would guess Harry to be a good two or three inches taller than the tallest of his classmates.

Standing calmly beside Harry, one hand holding firm on his shoulder, was a strikingly beautiful woman. She was tall, slender and magnificently well proportioned, with dark brown hair that held a hint of chestnut when the light struck it just so. Her expression was one of serene confidence and her eyes, dark and timeless, reflected this steadfast composure. There was nothing to indicate that she was in any way disturbed by the appearance of a dozen witches and wizards, wands at the ready, surrounding her.

“And you are, Miss...?” Dumbledore asked of her.

“Diziet Sma,” she replied with a beautiful smile. “I’m Harry’s mother.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. “I’m pleased to hear that Harry has been properly looked after.”

He, Harry and Sma ignored the incredulous looks they were getting from the rest of the Order of the Phoenix, which Dumbledore had hurriedly assembled. It was Professor McGonagall that cleared her throat and asked, “Adopted mother, I presume.”

“Yes,” Sma nodded.

“And where, if I might ask,” said Dumbledore, “did you adopt Harry from?”

Sma levelled a look at the old man. For just a fraction of a second Dumbledore felt like a student again, being tested by Madam Marchbanks. This disconcerting feeling did not go away as Sma coolly stated, “Funny thing. I found him abandoned on a doorstep. Horrid, really. He was cut up and bleeding and bruised and had nothing to protect him from the cold but a singed baby blanket. It’d been nearly two days since he’d last eaten anything. You’d almost think the people that left him there didn’t care a wit if he lived or died. Can you believe they hadn’t even bothered to give him any medical attention?”

Throughout her mildly, not to mention politely, delivered tirade, Sma kept her eyes locked with Dumbledore’s. The old wizard felt every word, every accusation, battering against him like physical blows to his body. It was only thanks to his many years of experience that he did not stagger under the weight of her words.

“Yes,” he muttered, “I can see why you’d think that.”

“Albus Dumbledore,” said Sma, which caused him to start slightly. He should not have been surprised that she knew who he was, almost every witch and wizard in the world knew his name, but for some reason he felt that there was more to it than that. Sma continued to stare pointedly at him as she enquired, “And what, if I might ask,” she paraphrased his earlier question, “brings you and your... friends... to Little Whinging?”

“The young man at your side, Ms. Sma,” admitted Dumbledore, realizing that the truth was his only option. “And yourself?”

“Harry wanted to see the place where he might have lived, had we not intervened.”

“Ah. I’m afraid that number four is in the other direction. Behind you.”

“We were just leaving.”

“Only dropped in for a short visit?”

“Considering my Aunt Petunia’s reaction, that’s probably for the best,” retorted Harry, deciding to enter the conversation.

Dumbledore’s eyes slid away from Sma and focused on him. “And what reaction was that, Harry?”

Harry shrugged and said, “Screaming in terror before slamming the door in my face.”

“Ha ha,” Dumbledore laughed softly. “Yes, I imagine that could very easily be the case. Your resemblance to James, your father, is truly remarkable. It is almost as if I were seeing him, standing in front of me, once again. Doubtless Petunia thought she was being visited by a ghost.”

~ *Ghosts. Wonderful, they're superstitious as well as mad*, scoffed Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

“Really?” asked Harry, pleased to know his assumptions were correct.

“Yes,” confirmed McGonagall, speaking up again. “As Professor Dumbledore said; the likeness is incredible. You have Lily’s eyes though. I’ve never seen that particular shade of green in anyone else.”

“My mother’s eyes,” repeated Harry. It was strange, thinking of someone other than Sma as his mother. A thought occurred to him and he asked, “I don’t suppose you have any images or video of my parents that I could see?”

“Er, no, no video, but I do have some old photographs,” admitted McGonagall.

“So, Ms. Sma,” asked Dumbledore, returning his attention to the tall woman, “Where were you and Harry going, now that your visit to Privet Drive is over?”

“Strangely enough, we were on our way to visit Hogwarts,” said Sma. The various Minds involved in this venture had advised against revealing their knowledge of events at Godric’s Hollow. She unbuttoned her suit jacket and reached into the inside pocket. From there she extracted the letter that had mysteriously appeared in Harry’s room on Staff orbital. “We received this letter some months ago and decided to come have a look.”

“Ah, I am glad to see it managed to reach you. We weren’t sure that our ritual had been successful.”

~ *Doubtless it involved a great deal of blood sacrifices and prancing around naked*, commented Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

Spurred on by sudden feeling of mischief, as well as wanting to observe their reactions, Harry adopted the most innocent expression he could muster and asked, “Ritual? You didn’t sacrifice any livestock animals did you? And if so, were you naked when you did it?”

Harry watched with interest as his words registered. McGonagall’s eyes bugged out for a split second before she managed to force her composure back to the fore, though her cheeks were a tinge pinker than before and her lips had compressed to a thin white line. The unpleasant looking man’s expression grew dark and he began to mutter furiously under his breath. Harry could make out repeated utterances of the word “arrogant” and “ignorant”. It was strangely amusing as well as satisfying. The rest of the witches and wizards present stared at him in gobsmacked disbelief.

Dumbledore, however, clapped both hands to his belly and threw his head back with a laugh. “Ha ha ha! Delightful!” Chuckling merrily, he looked at Harry, tears of mirth in his eyes, and said, “Rest assured, Mr. Potter; no blood was shed, nor were any virgin maidens sacrificed. And all the participants were fully clothed for the duration. You will find that any rituals involving a lack of clothing were invariably written by adolescent wizards.”

“How reassuring to know that you’re not completely backward barbarians,” riposted Harry.

This little wisecrack earned him an elbow to the ribs from Sma, who quietly hissed, “Be polite, or shut up.”

“Sorry,” he muttered in apology.

“So, Professor Dumbledore,” said Sma, returning all attention to the headmaster, “shall we discuss the details of Harry’s schooling here or in a more comfortable environment?”

“Details, Miss Sma?” asked Dumbledore, affecting a puzzled expression.

Sma gave the man a predatory smile and bluntly stated, “We’re not here for Harry to attend Hogwarts, Professor, we’re here to investigate the school and decide whether or not to ignore the acceptance letter you sent to us.”

Dumbledore’s brows beetled unhappily at the veiled insinuation that they might find Hogwarts unsuitable. “I’m afraid, Miss Sma, that Harry is already enrolled as a Hogwarts student. The Ministry of Magic--”

“Has nothing to do with fact that Harry or myself can choose for him to attend school elsewhere,” interrupted Sma. The Culture was used to operating from a position of strength and Sma knew that this was the case here as well. Dumbledore clearly *wanted* Harry to go to Hogwarts. “Our research has revealed at least two other schools in this part of the world with reputations equal to Hogwarts. Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, I believe they’re called.”

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore allowed, but countered with, “though neither of those schools hold their lessons in English.”

“Harry is perfectly fluent in both French and German,” said Sma.

“And nine other languages, excluding English,” added Harry. He did not mention that two of those languages were from off world.

“A dozen languages?” muttered Dumbledore in surprise. “That is very impressive for a child of your age.”

“By your standards it is,” demurred Sma. The pride in her voice was evident for all to hear, but Skaffen-Amtiskaw and Harry (to a lesser degree) were aware of something else; the barest trace of that well hidden disdain and patronising smugness that the Culture invariably displayed when dealing with a less advanced society. Sma then tapped her foot impatiently and asked, “So what will it be, Professor? Will our discussion take place here or someplace else? Assuming, of course, that it takes place at all...”

Fully aware that Sma had him over the proverbial barrel, Dumbledore decided to cut his losses. Any attempt to force a decision upon them would not be well received and would likely only serve to alienate Harry from him. That was something that the old wizard could not allow to happen. If Harry were to ever find his true place in wizarding society, he would need the appropriate guidance.

“I would be more than happy to answer any questions you might have, Miss Sma, in my office at Hogwarts,” he offered.

“That sounds reasonable,” Sma agreed. “What time would suit you?”

“No time like the present, my dear.”

Sma arched an eyebrow at his familiarity and asked, “And how would you propose that we get there?”

Dumbledore smiled benevolently at the young woman, pleased that he had taken the necessary precautions before the Order had left for Privet Drive. Portkeys, he knew, were a less than popular means of travel and rarely enjoyed by people making their first steps into the magical world. Most Muggleborns hated them with a passion, making them a less than ideal way of getting Harry to Hogwarts. The boy would doubtless be greatly unimpressed by such a wild journey to the school.

Apparation was a possibility, but Dumbledore had to acknowledge that many people found Side-Along Apparation almost as unpleasant as portkeys. Doubtless Sma was more than able to make the journey under her own power, possibly taking Harry with her, but the headmaster preferred the idea of controlling their approach and arrival at Hogwarts.

"I have already arranged suitable transportation for both you and young Harry," he said.

Reaching into his robe pocket, he withdrew his timepiece and checked. Yes, the timing was almost perfect.

This proved prophetic, as there was a sudden bang and flash of light at the far end of Privet Drive. In a manner very much like the public Knight Bus, the semi-official Hogwarts Headmaster's Automobile had arrived. It was not dissimilar to the cars used by the Ministry, though it saw far less usage. Most witches and wizards could Apparate, or use the Floo, so the Headmobile (as it was dubbed by Dumbledore's predecessor, Professor Dippet) was normally reserved for those rare occasions when a visiting dignitary was being brought to the school for an official reception.

Dumbledore himself only used the vehicle when he was called away from Hogwarts in his capacity as the Supreme Mugwump, three or four times a year. Still, it was enough to give Argus Filch, its designated driver, enough practice to get around the countryside. It had been on a hunch that Dumbledore had summoned Filch and ordered him to bring the vehicle to Little Whinging. By the look of it, it was a well played hunch indeed.

"What in the name of everything is *that*?" demanded Harry, staring at the vehicle in disbelief.

"It's a motorcar of some sort," said Sma, though there was a touch of uncertainty in her voice. She regarded the machine with incredulous eyes as it pulled up alongside the pavement where they were standing, puttering noisily to a halt.

~ These wizard folk are clearly even more backward than we had thought, transmitted Skaffen-Amtiskaw to their neural-laces. ~ According to the historical records, that is a Model T automobile, produced by the Ford Motor Company, colloquially known as either Tin Lizzies or Flivvers. Production was halted sixty-four local years ago. You won't find one of these outside of a museum or private collection, at least not anywhere on the rest of the planet.

Harry looked at the newly arrived car and then turn to regard the other vehicles scattered along the street. The differences between them were glaringly obvious, yet Dumbledore seemed oblivious to the discrepancy. The headmaster smiled happily at them and motioned to the Model-T.

"After you," he invited, waving them on.

The various members of Order, who had been watching and listening closely, were dismissed with a subtle gesture. There would be time for discussion and debriefing later, once Dumbledore had a chance to assess the situation. In ones and twos, the witches and wizards Apparated away in a series of loud cracks, something that Sma and Skaffen-Amtiskaw took close notice of; as the sounds were similar to the noise made when Harry Under-Jumped. The last to depart were Professor McGonagall and the dark man that had spent most of the encounter alternately glaring or sneering at Harry.

"I'm not being paid enough for this," Harry grumbled to Sma as they approached the car.

"You're not being paid at all," she countered, as the car's driver exited the vehicle and opened the rear door for them.

"I should be," he retorted. Pausing just before the car, he switched to his lace and asked, *~ Are you sure we can't just take the module?*

~ Sorry, Harry, but they're watching us too closely, replied Sma.

~ I could Under-Jump us to the school, he suggested.

~ Definitely not, exclaimed Skaffen-Amtiskaw as Sylvester slinked into the car and used its effectors and sensors to make a thorough sweep the interior for any potential danger or treachery. ~ We want to have some idea of their capabilities before we reveal yours.

~ Great. What's that English phrase? Bugger? Yes. Bugger.

"Oh, come on, Harry," Sma chuckled, climbing into the car once Sylvester had given the all clear. There was a moment's pause as she processed the realization that the interior of the Model-T was evidently larger than its exterior. A quick query of the combat small-drone confirmed this. Forcefully stomping down on her initial reaction, she settled Skaffen-Amtiskaw on the floor by her feet and glanded enough *Calm* to keep herself from freaking out. "I'm sure it won't be that bad."

Knowing that he wasn't going to win this fight, Harry relented and dropped into the seat next to her. Butch flapped its way down from the nearby lamppost it had been perched on, ducking inside and settling into place on his shoulder. It took him several seconds to realize what Sma already knew. His eyes grew wide as he peered about the plush, yet greatly oversized, interior of the old automobile, trying to work out exactly what was going on.

"Thank you, Argus," said Dumbledore to the driver as he joined them in the back. "Take us directly to Hogwarts, if you will."

The driver nodded sharply and closed the door once the headmaster was settled. He moved to the front of the vehicle and gave several vigorous spins of the crank handle, which resulted in the engine coming back to life with a loud cough and rumble. Harry and Sma exchanged glances as the entire chassis began to vibrate to a degree that was impossible to ignore. The driver quickly returned to his seat behind the steering wheel and, with a violent churning of gears, set off.

The trip to Hogwarts was very interesting to all involved, though for wildly different reasons. Harry and Sma were extremely put off by the wild movements and insane speed that the Model-T used to transverse the distance to the school. Even the GCU *It's Not My Fault*, monitoring them closely from orbit, was amazed by the pace the antique automobile managed. It reported, with a sort of stunned disbelief, that they had maintained a steady velocity of mach 1.3 for the entire journey from Little Whinging to the Scottish Highlands.

Certainly the Culture could easily have built something to match this feat, and even exceed it, but not without including some substantial amounts of technology. The most advanced machinery the Ship found in the old Model-T was an exceedingly primitive internal combustion engine, one that should not have been able to produce a speed of much more than seventy kilometres an hour. By rights the whole contraption should have exploded from the pressures required to achieve such speeds. Not to mention the fact that the vehicle itself should have burst into flames, its fragile chassis ignited by air friction alone.

The drones; Butch, Sylvester and Skaffen-Amtiskaw were also very busy. They were making a comprehensive examination of the headmaster, even going so far as the subatomic level, though such meticulous detail was reserved for the man's brain and nervous system, rather than his entire body. Butch and Sylvester, being not as fully sentient, were far more objective about their findings than the more sophisticated Skaffen-Amtiskaw. While the escort drone was more than a little horrified by its inspection of the man's teeth, it was soon forced to admit that Dumbledore appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary human male, albeit with a sweet tooth.

There was also the small matter of how the vehicle happened to be larger on the inside than it was on the outside. The idea of a dimensionally transcendental space was hardly a new one. Admittedly it was something currently beyond Culture technology, but the idea was there. At present the Minds were only partially able to accomplish such a feat, primarily by means of shifting portions of their own core systems into hyperspace, thereby taking advantage of faster-than-light processing that could be maintained there. But to be able to actually warp normal space and increase a finite volume...

Suffice to say, those Minds with an interest in Earth suddenly found themselves wondering if perhaps they were in over their heads. This was something that was almost unknown to the Culture, though there were a few rare precedents. After several long seconds of discussion, debate and wild guesswork (another rare occurrence) the various Minds involved decided to sit back and wait and watch. When dealing with such glacially slow creatures as human beings, a Mind had no option but to be patient. And as with everything else they did, Minds were very, very good at being patient.

Albus Dumbledore on the other hand, was watching both Harry and Sma very closely. What he found piqued his curiosity to untold levels. There was a great deal of banal and otherwise forgettable small talk. He made sure that they did not discuss anything of any true import before arriving at Hogwarts. He had no intention of accidentally putting either of them on guard until he had the home field advantage.

Despite this, he found himself learning a great deal.

The more he spoke to them both, the more he realised that he could not place their accents. Their English, while perfectly fluent, bore no resemblance to those found anywhere in Britain or the continent. There was a strange tone to their speech, despite their clear enunciation, one that he simply did not recognise. Having dealt with people from just about every corner of the globe, he was familiar with just about every variation of the English language that could be found.

Their clothing was of fine quality, but not too extravagant. Clearly they were not lacking for wealth, but did not bother flaunting it. This boded well. However, they were dressed in a purely Muggle style, without any hint of wizarding influence. Strange, considering that they were from a strongly magical background, otherwise they would never have been able to hide Harry so effectively. This suggested that they either lived in close proximity to Muggles, not unlike the more reticent half-bloods and Muggleborns, or they were simply very skilled in blending in.

Cautious probing about whether they had had an enjoyable journey to England revealed that they had made the trip by boat. Harry intimated that they had switched between two or three different ships, though no names or ports of call were mentioned. This would certainly explain the delay in their arrival, though Dumbledore could not initially fathom the reasoning behind using such a slow means of transport. After some consideration, he realized that travel by boat would make it much easier for them to maintain the wards and other defences used to keep Harry hidden, thereby ensuring his safety over the course of the voyage.

The headmaster had just learned that they had enjoyed a full breakfast before visiting Privet Drive, when Filch leaned back and announced, "We're almost there, Professor."

"Thank you, Argus," Dumbledore acknowledged. "Please slow down so that we may enjoy the view."

Filch obeyed with alacrity and the Model-T's gears groaned loudly as the man dropped down a notch and reduced their speed to a somewhat more sedate pace. Neither he nor Dumbledore noticed the obvious relief that their guests expressed at this.

Dumbledore waited carefully until they reached the last bend in the road leading up the castle's main gates. He leaned forward in the seat and pointed, "And there it is; Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

It was a rare chance that Dumbledore would observe a person's reaction to seeing Hogwarts for the first time. Being the headmaster, it meant that people more often than not came to him, meaning that he was already inside the castle when they arrived. Having such an opportunity, especially one involving Harry Potter, prompted the old wizard to watch Harry and Sma's expressions closely. What he saw on their faces and in their eyes was not what he had expected.

Perhaps the closest word would be indifference, though there was far more to it than that.

Sma's expression remained perfectly calm and devoid of any true emotion. It was the patiently polite face of a world class conductor being forced to listen to a recital of his favourite symphony, being played on a pennywhistle by an untrained orang-utan. What really caught Dumbledore's notice, however, was the flicker of recognition in her dark brown eyes. She had seen Hogwarts before. It was not something new to her, but rather

something she was already familiar with. And, to his chagrin, he had the feeling that Sma found the sight not only unremarkable, but wholly unimpressive.

Harry's reaction was not too dissimilar to his adoptive mother's, thought there were some shades of difference. He was not as good at hiding his emotions as Sma. A ghost of a grimace flickered across his face as he took in the sight of the ancient castle. Not only unimpressed, but disdainfully unimpressed. His entire body shifted in a way that spoke loudly of a disgruntled apprehension. It did not take someone of Dumbledore's intelligence to recognise that Harry was not feeling the least bit enthusiastic about visiting the school. Yet there was a reluctant resolve in his eyes, to see it through and tolerate the situation for as long as it lasted.

Neither of the pair exhibited any indication that this was their first viewing of the school. Indeed, the three GCUs in orbit had made exhaustive surveys of Hogwarts, though always maintaining the hundred metre approach limit. Every single detail of Hogwarts and its grounds had been meticulously recorded and examined, the data used to familiarize the Culture's sole wizard to the place that could potentially be his home for the next few years. Sma and Harry had familiarised themselves with every aspect of Hogwarts' external structure. Only the details of its interior remained largely unknown to them.

"Very impressive, headmaster," said Sma, for the sake of courtesy. She had visited worlds, during her tenure in Contact, where there had been buildings ten times the size and grandeur of Hogwarts. And a fair number of those had been erected by civilizations even more primitive than Terran humanity.

"Very," agreed Harry, also speaking only as a matter of politeness. He was used to the considerably more massive scale of construction that was prevalent in the Culture, even disregarding such colossal structures as Orbitals and GSVs. Even the GCU *It's Not My Fault*, a comparatively small vessel, was several times the volume of the castle.

~ *Interesting*, observed Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

~ *What is?* asked Sma.

~ *Bleed off currents from Hyperspace Grid energy saturating the area surrounding the castle is generating a substantial amount of electromagnetic interference. It's actually strong enough to affect my own electronic systems. I'm measuring a nearly forty percent degradation in functionality on that level of my mind-model. I imagine that any local technology would be rendered entirely unusable.*

~ *Are you in any danger?* asked Harry, concerned.

~ *Of course not*, huffed the drone. ~ *Electro-magnetism is hardly enough to disrupt all five levels of my mind-mode. My AI core and photonic nucleus could survive EM interference a hundred times more powerful than what Hogwarts is generating. And even if those went off line, I'd still have my automechanical complex and after that, ugh, the backup biochemical brain. So don't worry, Harry, I'm hardly in any danger.*

~ *Is the same true for Butch and Sylvester?* asked Sma.

~ *Please, Sma. Those dunderheads were built for combat. They're even more immune to EM than I am.*

~ *Good. Nowhush, we're almost there.*

The massive and intricately decorated wrought-iron main gates swung open as the Model-T approached. Filch drove them up to the castle's front entrance, where Professor McGonagall and unpleasant dark man were waiting for them. With a grumbling shudder, the automobile ground to a halt at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the doors.

Dumbledore nodded to their driver and said, "Thank you, Argus. That will be all for the day."

"Yes, headmaster," said Filch with a nod as he climbed out of the driver's seat and came back to open the door to the passenger section.

As he was closest to the door, Dumbledore exited the car first. He stood just outside and gestured for Harry and Sma to disembark. They did, but only after both Butch and Sylvester preceded them. The two combat small-drones immediately began to survey the area, Butch from the air and Sylvester by ground. After taking several seconds to confirm that no obvious threats awaited them, Harry and Sma stepped onto Hogwarts grounds for the first time.

"Next time, we're using a module or Under-Jumping," stated Harry, in a whispered tone that brooked no argument. "I don't care what the Minds think. I don't care what the wizards think. I am *not* being subjected to something like that again."

"I'll second that notion," agreed Sma, wondering if she looked as frazzled as she felt.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Dumbledore, beaming happily at them. He led them up the stairs leading to the front doors and introduced them to the witch and wizard that had been waiting for them. "This is Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and professor of Transfiguration," he said, "and this is Severus Snape, our Potions Master."

"How do you do," said Sma, shaking hands with them both. She noticed that Snape reacted to her touch as if she were potentially infectious.

"Pleased to finally meet you, Professor McGonagall," said Harry, also shaking her hand. He turned to Snape and, aware of the man's apparent dislike for him, sketched a short bow from the shoulders. "And you as well, Professor Snape."

~ *Very diplomatic of you, Harry*, observed Skaffen-Amtiskaw, from where it rested on the floor by Sma's feet.

~ *The man obviously doesn't like me*, replied Harry.

~ *All the more reason to be as polite as possible*, said the drone.

"So," said Dumbledore, "shall we retire to my office and discuss Mr. Potter's placement here at Hogwarts? And afterwards, perhaps, I might offer you a short tour of the castle?"

"We'd be delighted," said Sma.

"Unfortunately Professor Snape and I have classes to teach," said Professor McGonagall. "We have already missed one period and would prefer not to miss another. By your leave, Headmaster?"

"Of course, Professor McGonagall, of course," said Dumbledore graciously. "Forgive me for taking up so much of your time."

"Ms. Sma, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall, nodding politely as she withdrew into the castle. Snape did not say anything, merely giving a final inscrutable look to Harry before departing, his black robes billowing impressively behind him.

"After you, Professor," said Sma, 'picking up' Skaffen-Amtiskaw and indicating for Dumbledore to lead the way.

-oOo-

The group's entry into Hogwarts drew to an almost immediate halt the moment they passed through the Entrance Hall and into the hallway that followed the most direct route to the headmaster's office. It took Dumbledore a moment to realize that his guests had stopped in place and were staring with wide eyes at the corridor walls. Their expressions were the most genuine he had seen thus far.

"Sma... the paintings... they... move," said Harry, clearly disturbed by this fact.

"Must be some sort of screens... I think," said Sma. She was also disturbed by the animated artwork, but was better at hiding it.

~ *I'm not detecting anything remotely technological about them. Nothing but paint and canvas*, Skaffen-Amtiskaw transmitted to their laces. ~ *For that matter, I can't identify anything in this castle more complicated than a wind-up timepiece.*

~ *Then how are they moving?* Harry asked.

~ *Magic?* the drone suggested in jest.

"If you will follow me?" said Dumbledore, drawing their eyes away from the walls. It was not hard to recognise the amusement glittering behind his eyes, something that immediately stirred up both Harry and Sma's ire. Nobody in the Culture liked to think that a less sophisticated society might consider them and their reactions amusing. That was more the Culture's speciality, after all, and not something they were used to experiencing from the other side.

"Is this a school or an art museum, headmaster?" Sma asked, motioning to the paintings lining both sides of the passage.

"A bit of both, really," declared Dumbledore with a grin. "Though admittedly we *do* try and impart some more practical knowledge to our students."

"Right you are, headmaster, right you are," agreed a painting of a generously endowed woman in a flowing and elaborate yellow dress.

Harry immediately rounded on Sma, his eye wider than before. "They can talk!" he yelled, unconsciously slipping from English to Marain, something that immediately drew Dumbledore's attention to him. "Sma, the paintings in this place can move and talk! How the fuck can they do that? The reports said they didn't have the technology for it and there's no way they could do this with grid energy!"

"I have no idea, Harry," Sma replied. She glanced down at Skaffen-Amtiskaw, still disguised as a briefcase. ~ *What about you, drone? Anything?*

~ *Nothing. Absolutely nothing*, repeated Skaffen-Amtiskaw, sounding utterly perplexed. ~ *There isn't a hint of advanced technology in this place. For that matter, there's not even a sign of primitive electronics, not that they'd be able to function. Grief's sake, Sma, look around – they have flaming torches mounted on the walls as a light source!*

"Forgive me, headmaster, but do all the paintings here talk?"

Again, Dumbledore offered them a grin and nodded, "No, not all, but most of them."

Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath and glanded some *Calm*. He had a feeling he would be needing it if he were to survive any length of time at Hogwarts with his sanity intact. It had only been a few minutes and already he found himself reduced to a bundle of nervous energy. And not the pleasant kind, either.

"Can we get this over with, please?" he asked unhappily. He wasn't really aware of it, but he was still speaking his native Marain.

"Yes, let's," agreed Sma. She immediately realized that Dumbledore was watching them intently, doubtless wondering what they were saying. "And you'd best stick to speaking English," she reminded him, switching back to the language in question.

"Right," agreed Harry, opening his eyes. Under his breath he muttered, "Even if it is a half-arsed language."

Sma turned to Dumbledore and prompted, "Sorry for the delay, headmaster. Please, let's continue to your office."

"Very well," agreed Dumbledore gamely. He made no mention of their lapse into Marain, even though his curiosity had been roused to untold heights by the brief exchange. Though limited in the number of languages he could speak, Dumbledore did at least recognise those that he could not. The language Harry and Sma had spoken, however, was completely alien to him.

Leading the way through the corridors, and several flights of impressively grand stairs, Dumbledore took the time to observe his guests further. The thing that struck him the most was the unhurried and casual ease with which both Harry and Sma moved. It was a natural elegance unlike anything he had ever seen. Some of the old and noble houses could raise their children to match it, through many years of lessons in comportment, but it was always a studied and carefully maintained poise.

There was a slight difference in their gaits, however. Sma, unlike Harry, moved with a palpable grace that literally screamed, "Predator". Dumbledore could see that the vicious lash of her tongue was not her only weapon. There would definitely be no case of her proverbial bark being worse than her bite.

He also, for the first time, took note to the two animals that were accompanying them. The cat and the owl, dubbed Sylvester and Butch respectively, were both undoubtedly Harry's familiars. Their obvious intelligence was impossible to miss and Dumbledore had seen them occasionally look to the boy for instruction. Odd that someone so young should have a single familiar bound to him, let alone two.

Finally they found themselves standing in front of a positively hideous stone statue of a gargoyle. This was the guardian to the rotating staircase that led up to the headmaster's office.

"Almond Nougat," said Dumbledore.

As the gargoyle stepped out of their way, Harry clearly muttered, "You have to be shitting me."

Sma nodded in agreement, "Yeah."

Stepping onto the staircase, Dumbledore mused that it was a good thing Minerva had classes. The strict old witch would doubtless have been most displeased with how freely Harry was cussing. It was puzzling though. Harry had obviously been raised in a magical environment, yet many of his reactions upon entering Hogwarts were very much like those of a Muggleborn, albeit slightly more vehement than most.

Finally reaching the door to his office, Dumbledore opened it and bid them to enter. Neither of his guests moved. Instead Sylvester slipped through the open doorway and into the room beyond. The cat was followed a second later by Butch, who had been perched on Harry's shoulder whilst they had been walking through the school. After a second or two, Harry and Sma exchanged a brief look and made their way inside, Harry first and then Sma.

Clearly Harry's familiars were preceding them in order to scout and secure the room. Dumbledore was undecided on how he felt about this. There was some degree of approval in their being so cautious. No doubt Alastor Moody would greatly commend their Constant Vigilance. On the other hand, however, it showed a distinct lack of trust in Dumbledore, something that left the old wizard feeling somewhat disgruntled. He had hoped that Harry's trust would be easy to win over, but this no longer seemed likely.

Shaking these thoughts away, Dumbledore stepped into his office and shut the thick oak door behind him. Turning around, he found that Harry and Sma had already moved deep into the room and were already sitting in two of the plush armchairs that were arrayed in front of his desk. Harry was seated in a casual, yet alert manner. Slightly slouched, but still maintaining good posture. Sma, her briefcase set down beside her chair, had arranging herself with precise attention to both form and bearing. Sylvester was sniffing about the various cabinets and Butch had found a perch on Fawkes's stand.

He could not help but stare slightly as he made his way behind his desk and to his own seat. That they had taken their seats without invitation seemed to be an exquisitely calculated slight against him. It was a statement that they were the ones waiting on him, rather than the reverse. Of course, it could very easily have been an equally subtle admission that they were comfortable enough to relax in his presence. He had a feeling it was the former, rather than the more pleasant latter.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable," Dumbledore said graciously as he lower himself into place. His words were laced with well hidden sarcasm. He suspected that only Sma would detect his displeasure.

"We already have, thank you," she acknowledged politely.

There was a hint of amusement in both their eyes as they waited patiently for the headmaster to recover and begin the discussion.

Feeling the need to level the playing field, primarily by reminding them of exactly whose home ground they were at, Dumbledore gave a silent call. A moment later, the air between him and his guests exploded in a ball of flame. A shrill cry of exultation filled the air as a large bird appeared in the office, its magnificent scarlet and gold plumage gleaming brightly in the late morning sun.

Both Sylvester and Butch had reacted within less than ten microseconds to the new arrival's appearance. Both combat small-drones powered up their weapon systems to ready. Effector fields, various lasers and swarms of nanomissiles were mere instants from being used, the drones prepared to shed their pseudo-flesh disguises and eliminate the potential threat with all due prejudice. It was only the cautionary missive from Skaffen-Amtiskaw, sent two microseconds later that held them in check. All three drones settled back and waited to see what happened next. Harry and Sma, being only human, took much longer to react.

"Did that bird just appear in a ball of flames?" asked Harry, leaning in close to Sma.

"Yes, it did," confirmed Sma, her eyes locked on the bird as it settled on Dumbledore's shoulder.

Perhaps introductions are in order,” said Dumbledore, scratching gently under the bird’s beak. It seemed to be enjoying the attention, as it was trilling softly in a melodious tone that left both Harry and Sma feeling remarkably at ease, despite the seriousness of the encounter.

“What is that thing?” Sma asked. “It’s no owl.”

“This is my companion, Fawkes,” Dumbledore replied. “He is a phoenix.”

~ *Interesting*, observed Skaften-Amtiskaw. ~ *Phoenixes are recorded in Terrasa mythology. There was no indication that they were real.*

~ *I suppose it’s understandable*, replied Sma. ~ *They’re much smaller than dragons, which are also considered to be myths by the bulk of the planet’s population, yet we’ve observed several “reserves” filled to them brim with them.*

“So, Ms. Sma, Harry,” said Dumbledore, turning his attention back to them, “where would you like to begin?”

-oOo-

[New M16-level Core Group formed. @n4.58.231.1642

Name: Interesting Times Gang (Act VI).]

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

And so it begins.

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

Has any progress been made in determining exactly how the wizards learned that Mr. Potter was visiting Little Whinging?

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

Nothing thus far. Perhaps Dumbledore will let something slip during this discussion with Sma and Harry.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Doubtful. From what we have seen the man appears to have some degree of political savvy. It is unlikely that he will make any mistakes this early in our dealings with him.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Do not forget that he has been observing them closely at the same time. Clearly he has experience in matters such as this.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

He may be old, at least by Terrasa standards, but Diziet Sma is over twice his age. Thanks to her tenure in both Contact and Special Circumstances, she will likely have greater practical knowledge in keeping information from other parties.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Perhaps, but Dumbledore is no fool. That much is obvious, even so early as now.

~

x *No Fixed Abode* (GSV, Sabbaticaler, ex-Equator Class):

I would not worry. The cover story that we have provided for Harry and Sma will sufficiently deflect Dumbledore’s investigations. He will not learn anything of consequence.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

At least not of the Culture.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

As it should be. Can we confirm that the cover story and false background have been properly constructed? Dumbledore will begin to investigate as soon as he is able, once Ms. Sma puts him on the trail.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

Everything is in place. The GCU *Artificial Stupidity* has seen to it. The Republic of South Africa does not yet have a comprehensive digital network, so most of the work involved laying down a “paper trail” in the appropriate physical records.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

So, as far as anyone on Earth will be able to determine, Harry Potter has spent the past ten years living in relative seclusion in one of the more affluent areas of Cape Town .

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

Yes. Additionally, twenty people from all three GCUs [text and details attached] have been inserted into the population to serve as witnesses for confirmation of the documentation trail.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Interesting as this may be, have you examined the data from the *It's Not My Fault* ? I refer specifically to the rather unusual means of transportation used to deliver our people to the school.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

I have. Clearly the data are in error.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

Are you joking? The data were gathered by two combat small-drones, Skaffen-Amtiskaw and the *Fault* ! How could all four of them be in error?

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

They must be. What they describe is impossible.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Please. While the data may be in question, the facts remain. Harry Potter and Diziet Sma were transported in a vehicle with a spatially transcendental interior, which is capable of speeds impossible for such primitive technology.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

Perhaps the data are accurate and we are merely interpreting it incorrectly.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

I will concede the possibility.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

And how do you intend to explain paintings that can move and talk? Even I refuse to believe that such phenomena are possible, regardless of whether these wizards can tap into both hyperspace layers simultaneously or not.

~

x *No Fixed Abode* (GSV, Sabbaticaler, ex-Equator Class):

There is an explanation. A logical answer. We must simply search for it.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Saseris system, [solo]):

I will believe that when the indisputable proof is transmitted to me.

~

[End document/comments track.]

-oOo-

Harry had no real experience in diplomacy, but he could compare it to being not unlike a debate of sorts. Those he had plentiful experience in. In this instance Harry had not said very much, allowing Sma to do most of the talking. The arguments and counter-arguments, polite to a fault in all cases, had been traded back and forth with consummate skill by both parties.

He was pleasantly surprised to see Sma in action for the first time. He had always known that she had a great deal of experience in such matters; her work in both Contact and Special Circumstances made it impossible for her not to. There was an undeniable elegance in her approach to Dumbledore's negotiating. The old wizard was skilled, Harry could see this, but Sma appeared to be leading him about as if he were nothing more than a mere babe.

Harry wondered if the headmaster was even aware of how easily Sma was manipulating him. Harry had not even realized it was happening until Skaffen-Amtiskaw had begun to transmit a running commentary to Harry's neural lace; explaining what Sma was doing, how and why she was doing it as well as the likely responses Dumbledore would make in reply. After that, it was easy to see how the Culture's nine-thousand years of experience so utterly outmatched the wizard's.

Another remarkable accomplishment was that she managed to completely hide the fact that her knowledge of Earth's so-called "Magical World" was rudimentary at best. Dumbledore seemed perfectly convinced that she was as much of a witch as he was a wizard.

They had begun with a series of questions and answers, alternating back and forth. Dumbledore would make queries as to how Sma and her associates (thus far still unnamed) had managed to find Harry, how they had raised him, as well as their reasons for doing so. Sma would counter with inquiries as to what was expected of Harry whilst attending Hogwarts, where he would be staying, what the various classes were and so forth.

"So you don't teach your students anything but magic?" Sma asked. "No geography, sciences, politics, fine arts, life skills or anything like that?"

"Erm, no," Dumbledore replied. "This is a school of the magical arts."

"I see."

The discussion had then turned to payment. Skaffen-Amtiskaw had been particularly disgruntled about the idea that education, the pursuit of knowledge, was not freely available. This was hardly a bother to the Culture; who had managed to arrange substantial monetary accounts in most of the planet's more prominent banks. The drone had thus been pleasantly surprised, as had Sma and Harry, to learn that the fees for Harry's tuition at Hogwarts had already been paid for by his parents, even before he had been born. This revelation had been quickly followed by another discovery, one that impacted Harry on a personal level.

"And you have access to this vault?"

"Yes, the key has been in my care since James and Lily passed on. It is only a trust fund, however. The main Potter account will only become available to Harry upon his seventeenth birthday."

"So I won't be able to access it until then?" asked Harry.

"You cannot withdraw any actual money, though Gringotts should allow you to remove any heirlooms or other items."

Much haggling had followed on this, far more than Harry felt was warranted. In the end, however, Sma had neatly boxed Dumbledore into a moral corner. The old wizard had briefly left his seat to fetch the key from a drawer in one of the many cabinets scattered about the office. Once the key had been passed to her, Sma had promptly handed it to Harry.

The following hour or so had been spent discussing the reasons why Harry should bother learning at Hogwarts, rather than at another magical school located in a more convenient proximity to their supposed home in Cape Town. This was nothing more than a ploy, one of many, which Sma used to prod Dumbledore into making concessions that he normally would not.

"I'm still not convinced and I don't think Harry is either," said Sma.

"I assure you, Ms. Sma—"

Sma cut him off and said, "Why should we bother? The Huguenot Overlook offers everything that Hogwarts does. This school has no facilities that it doesn't. There are no classes or subjects here that it does not teach. By your own admission the cost is nearly a third less, prepaid or not, and it does not require Harry to live on the grounds while school is in session."

"And, no offence, but the school itself isn't a drafty, old castle," added Harry.

"Well, I'm sure we can make some arrangements..."

And so it continued. Harry was hardly an expert on reading people; humans in the Culture were generally very open in their dealings with each other, but he had the impression that Dumbledore was firmly on his back foot and trying his utmost to withstand the onslaught of Sma's demands. That she made those demands seem like politely phrased requests, and seemingly innocent ones, made it all the more impressive.

Finally, after three hours of intense discussion, Dumbledore called for lunch to be served. It was early afternoon and coincided with the time that the rest of the school attended lunch in the Great Hall. The headmaster suggested that they remain in his office, however, so that they did not cause a stir by appearing in public. This was somewhat confusing, as there appeared to be no reason that their presence should be remarked upon.

"So, Harry, did you enjoy growing up in Cape Town?"

Harry finished his mouthful of chicken sandwich before replying. "I suppose so," he said. "I've never really been anywhere else before, so I don't have anything to compare it against. We went straight to Little Whinging when we arrived in England – though the taxi we took did pass through London along the way. Still, Cape Town is a nice enough place, if a bit windy at times."

This was yet another part of the carefully constructed web of lies and misdirection created to provide a cover for Harry's past. He could hardly admit to having spent the past ten years living on a Culture mega-structure halfway around the galaxy. Of course, even if that fact did slip out it was unlikely that anyone would be willing to believe it.

"That's good to hear. I'm very much relieved to know that you have been well cared for," said Dumbledore with a smile.

"My mother is firmly of the belief that children should be kept happy and healthy," replied Harry, making a point of referring to Sma as his mother in as a way to reinforce his relationship to her. They did not want to give the impression that she could be removed or replaced.

"Any responsible adult would do the same," said Sma.

"Of course," agreed Dumbledore, by now well used to the subtle jabs Sma had been making at every opportunity. It had long since become painfully obvious to him that she vehemently disapproved of his leaving Harry on the Dursley's doorstep ten years ago.

"Have you ever been to Cape Town, sir?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I've never had the pleasure." He sipped at his tea and then asked, "I'm curious, Harry, but what happened to the scar on your forehead?"

Sma immediately stepped in, knowing that the subject made Harry uncomfortable, and rejoined, "You mean the one you neglected to treat ten years ago?"

"Ahem," Dumbledore coughed and took another sip of tea. "Yes. It is a curse scar, you see. It was caused when Voldemort's Killing Curse struck young Harry and then rebounded. Such injuries are notoriously difficult to treat, due to the high concentrations of magic within the wound. I am curious as to how you were able to treat it so effectively that it is almost completely gone. I am sitting not even six feet away and can barely discern it."

"We started by treating Harry's minor injuries," Sma paused to give Dumbledore yet another look of disapproval, "we decided to use a form of cosmetic surgery to remove the scar. After all, children can be cruel and we didn't want him being teased or shunned because of an easily correctable disfigurement."

Dumbledore was becoming inured to Sma's constant jabs, Harry thought, as the man's face did not even twitch at the rebuke.

Instead, he nodded thoughtfully and said, "How did you manage this? I had believed that the magic within the scar would resist any magic used in an attempt to heal it. The magical remnants of the Killing Curse were especially potent, as I recall from my own examination of the injury."

Sma sipped at the tea she had been served. "And it was. Very, very potent. We discovered as much when the surgical laser penetrated the outer skin layer."

"You used a Muggle medical technique?" asked Dumbledore, staring at her in obvious disbelief.

"We had hoped that avoiding the use of magic altogether would prevent any negative reaction," said Sma. Her delivery was perfectly level and her face utterly implacable. There was not a hint in her posture to suggest that she was lying through her teeth.

The GCU *Short Circuit*, which had been supervising the surgery, had not found any trace of grid energy permeating the cells comprising of Harry's scar. It was only when the surgical laser had cut across that hidden energy that anyone realized that something was wrong. A burst of energy had literally exploded out from Harry's body, consuming everything surrounding it. The entire Operating Theatre had been destroyed before the *Short Circuit* had managed to contain the blast and displace the excess energy before any more damage could be accrued.

Two human doctors and two medical drones had been caught in the energy storm. Everything had happened so quickly that the *Short Circuit* had not been able to perform an emergency Displace, let alone something less risky. None of the four had survived, though both drones and one of the humans had had their mind-states backed up on a regular basis. They were all restored to new bodies in short order, the drones almost immediately, though the doctor had to wait six months for a new body to be grown before his consciousness could be transferred to it.

The other human, however, had been a Disposable; one of those rare people that decided against having their mind-state recorded and stored in case of untimely body-death. Without a mind-state recording, there was nothing to be done, leaving the man permanently dead. He was only thirty years old; barely an adult by Culture standards. This was the sole reason that Harry disliked talking about the incident, even though he had been only a baby at the time and was in no way responsible for the loss of life.

Later inspection of the surgery records revealed that the energy had been there all along, hidden beneath the lingering wisps of grid energy that had been connected to Harry during the destruction of the house at Godric's Hollow. A follow-up examination of Harry revealed that the tightly bound knot of energy had been greatly disrupted by the conflicting energies and was slowly unravelling. Two years later all traces of it were gone and a second operation was arranged to remove Harry's scar, this time entirely by remote control. For the past eight years only a faint outline of the formerly vivid lightning scar remained and was slowly fading away as the underlying skin was renewed. The Minds projected that it would be gone entirely by the time Harry was fifteen.

"Might I ask what happened?" asked Dumbledore after Sma had lapsed into a long silence.

"There was an explosion. People died," said Harry curtly, before Sma could answer. "The energy embedded in the scar tissue was dispersed."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that," said Dumbledore softly. There was a strange look of contemplation in his eyes. "I am, however, relieved to know that the remnants of Voldemort's curse were destroyed. Such magics are usually a bane to their bearer throughout their life. I am glad that you have been spared that."

"I'll take your word for it," muttered Harry, ducking his head and staring intently at his teacup. He found the drink to be a noxious infusion of desiccated leaves containing a high percentage of toxic acids. It had been horribly bitter at first, but surprisingly palatable after the addition of some milk and sugar. Much to his surprise, he rather liked it.

"Speaking of injuries and healing," said Sma after a long pause, "could you go into more detail about Hogwarts' medical facilities?"

"Madam Pomfrey keeps the Hospital Wing in pristine order at all times. She is fully prepared to deal with any of the more common injuries that one can expect to find at Hogwarts, as well many more severe conditions," answered Dumbledore.

"I take it she is the only doctor you have on staff?" asked Sma.

"Madam Pomfrey is one of England's best Healers and prefers to be addressed by that title, rather than the Muggle equivalent," Dumbledore retorted.

"So she has no one else to assist her in case of an emergency?"

"Professor Snape is a fully certified Potions Master and supplies her with any healing potions or salves she may require. Professor Sprout, our Herbology teacher, regularly harvests those plants and herbs of medicinal value. The others professors, myself included, are also well experienced in helping to reverse any problems caused by wayward spells or magic. In the worst case, Healers from St. Mungo's can be brought in via floo or portkey."

"Interesting," mused Sma. "You say you and the other teachers have lots of experience in such matters. Do things often go wrong at Hogwarts?"

"Magic is a very temperamental thing, Ms. Sma," Dumbledore replied, once again finding himself under verbal fire.

"Then you must, as a matter of course, have precautions in place to minimize accidents. I think our Minds would be assuaged to hear them," said Sma, using the ambiguity of the English language to give her words a unique double meaning. Dumbledore had no idea that the Minds she was referring to were completely separate entities to herself and Harry.

Dumbledore could not help but release a small sigh. The woman was relentless. In many ways it was like dealing with Molly Weasley, had she been sorted into Ravenclaw or Slytherin, rather than Gryffindor.

"Of course, I'd be happy to elaborate..."

-oOo-

Night had fallen over Hogwarts and with it, came the conclusion of the arrangements regarding Harry's entry into the school.

By this point the principal focus of these discussions was almost bored to tears. Harry was an exceptionally precocious child, a result of both his environment and the careful nurturing of those that raised him. Despite all this, he was still only an eleven year old boy, who felt he had better things to do than listen to two adults talk ceaselessly. He was used to it, to be sure, but this time he had rarely been able to participate in the conversation; a result of Dumbledore being focused primarily on Sma and her burgeoning diplomatic coup.

It was now time for dinner and Dumbledore had invited them to eat in the castle's Great Hall, where the rest of the school was dining. Sma was happy enough to accept, but Harry held some reservations. He had a feeling that conversation at the dinner table was unlikely to be any more appealing than Dumbledore's platitudes and assurances.

"Explore the castle?" repeated Sma, as they descending from the headmaster's office.

"I'm really not that hungry," Harry explained. ~ *And besides which, this will give us a chance to make a scan of the school's interior. We only have external data at the moment. I'm sure the Minds would prefer to have a more comprehensive view of Hogwarts.*

~ *True enough*, agreed Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

"I don't think I want you wandering about a strange place alone, Harry," said Sma. ~ *It's an unwarranted risk.*

"Don't worry," said Harry, reassuring her. "I'll have Butch and Sylvester with me the whole while."

Reminded of the two combat small-drones, Sma felt at least some of her reluctance melt away. Dumbledore, seeing this, immediately put forth a suggestion of his own, hoping that a tour of the castle would serve to help increase Harry's meagre enthusiasm for attending school there. He had rarely seen a child that appeared to consider attending Hogwarts to be more of a chore than anything else. Of course, having Harry spend an entire day listening to two adults discussing such matters, he could understand the boy's weariness.

"I could arrange for one of the Prefects to show Harry around," he offered.

"You don't have to," said Harry quickly. "I wouldn't want to impose on anyone."

"If you're sure," allowed Sma.

"I won't take long, just a quick look around the place," Harry promised.

"In that case, Harry, I should warn you to stay away from the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side," said Dumbledore with a serious mien.

"Why's that?"

Dumbledore abruptly found himself in a bit of a quandary. He could not insist too stridently that Harry have an escort, as that would imply that it was unsafe for him to wander the school alone. By that reasoning he had no choice but to warn him about the passage leading to the Philosopher's Stone. Now that he had, however, he found himself with the messily complicated task of explaining the presence of a giant, three-headed dog within the boundaries of Hogwarts.

Doing the only thing he could, he lied.

"Professor Kettleburn, who teaches Care of Magical Creatures, is currently keeping an animal there for his class to study. Ordinarily our gamekeeper, Hagrid, would look after it, but we felt it was safer to house Fluffy inside the castle rather than an open paddock where he might have an easier chance of escaping."

"Fluffy?" repeated Harry, wondering what all the fuss could possibly be about if the animal had such an innocent name.

"I trust you have taken suitable precautions to protect the students from accidentally encountering... Fluffy?" Sma asked.

"Of course," Dumbledore nodded. "There are wards in place to alert the staff if anyone gets too close. Also, the room itself is secured by a variety of Locking Spells quite beyond the scope of any of our younger students."

This was another lie, though it did contain some amount of the truth. Dumbledore did have wards surrounding the third-floor corridor that kept track of everyone that came and went. The room containing Hagrid's pet, however, was easily accessible to anyone that cared to enter.

"And what of your older students?" asked Sma.

"Ah, I think we can trust them to listen to the warning I gave at the start of term. If they choose ignore it, well, they have sufficient training and skill to leave the area without coming to harm. They are almost adults, after all, and capable of making their own decisions."

"All right, I suppose that makes sense."

"I'll stay off the third-floor then."

"Excellent," Dumbledore beamed happily. "If you require assistance, call for Tilley. He is my personal house-elf and will be more than happy to escort you through the castle should you get lost."

"Thank you, headmaster," nodded Harry, setting off in the opposite direction, Butch resting on his shoulder and Sylvester slinking about his ankles.

Dumbledore and Sma stood for a moment, watching him walk away until he turned a corner. They then resumed their own journey to the Great Hall. They walked in companionable silence, both mentally reviewing their accomplishments for the day.

Sma was satisfied that Harry would be receiving the best instruction available, reasonably competent supervision by the staff and would be unlikely to find himself in any situation that might require intervention by the *It's Not My Fault*. All of the concessions they and the Minds had thought up had

been agreed to. They were all very minor things, but taken as a whole gave them and Harry a remarkable amount of control and leeway within the school. The only uncertainty was the value of Dumbledore's word, which was the only thing they could rely upon to see their agreement followed through.

Dumbledore was not feeling quite as pleased as Sma, but did have some consolation in the fact that Harry Potter confirmed his attendance at Hogwarts. Of course, he would have preferred to learn a bit more about both the boy and his guardian, not to mention those little details regarding his childhood and residence. It was only now, looking back, that he realized how little he had actually learned. He glanced at the woman walking beside him. His eyes dipped down to the plain black leather briefcase that Sma was carrying.

"If I might ask, Ms. Sma, but what is it that you keep in your briefcase?"

"You may ask," replied Sma.

It took a remarkable effort for Dumbledore not to roll his eyes at this childish verbal trap. Professor Vector was particularly fond of them. Allowing himself a very small sigh, barely noticeable through his beard, he repeated, "What is in your briefcase?"

Sma promptly answered, "Business documents. Stock portfolios. Share certificates. Things like that."

Skaffen-Amtiskaw, who only deigned to appear as a briefcase because explaining its presence would be too complicated, remained silent.

"Ah," Dumbledore nodded. He had a feeling that Harry's guardian would be meeting with the goblins soon, as Gringotts was the principal economic power within magical Britain. He would have to keep an eye on that. The magical bankers were reasonably trustworthy, yes, but only within strict limits.

The remainder of their walk passed with some meaningless small talk, which comprised mostly of Dumbledore making subtle inquiries into Harry's life and Sma's skilfully obscure rejoinders. Before long, they found themselves at the main entrance to the Great Hall, where the annual Halloween feast was progressing in its customary lively manner. All of the staff took immediate note of their arrival, as did several of the more observant students. The ever-present hum of conversation did not die out entirely, but did grow quieter than usual as more and more people turned their attention to the headmaster and his unknown guest.

"It's very... orange," said Sma after a moment. "And there are lots of bats."

"Yes, Professor Flitwick has done a remarkable job with this year's Halloween decorations, don't you think?"

"We don't celebrate Halloween."

"I understand that it's not very popular outside of Europe and the Americas."

"We have other ways of honouring the dead," said Sma.

"I've arranged for extra seats at the staff table," said Dumbledore, leading her down the central aisle.

Walking slowly to the front of the hall, studiously ignoring the many eyes watching her, Sma could not help but turn her gaze up to the hundreds of candle floating in the air above.

~ *Drone?* she silently asked.

~ *There's nothing remotely technological keeping those candles in the air*, replied Skaffen-Amtiskaw, knowing what she was asking. ~ *I imagine that they are using something similar to Harry's levitation technique, but my own sensors aren't delicate enough to detect such fine grid energy matrices. And I have no idea what structure they're using to maintain it.*

Graciously accepting the seat that Dumbledore proffered, Sma settled the drone on the floor beside it and took her place at the high table. She was sitting near the middle, sandwiched between the headmaster and his deputy, Professor McGonagall. Taking a moment to examine the generous selection of foods arrayed before her, some of which she recognised from her last visit to Earth, Sma began to dish up her meal.

"So, Ms. Sma, has everything been arranged?" asked McGonagall.

Sma nodded and said, "Yes. Professor Dumbledore has been most accommodating in answering our questions."

McGonagall pursed her lips slightly at the vague answer and asked, "When will Mr. Potter be joining us?" She pitched her voice just low enough to ensure that none of the students might overhear.

"We will be going to Diagon Alley tomorrow; to collect Harry's school supplies," said Sma.

"I was thinking that you could accompany them, Minerva, to ensure that things go smoothly," added Dumbledore.

"And my classes for the day?"

"It had been many years since I last taught a lesson in Transfiguration, but I *do* remember how."

"Very well, Albus."

~ *After the talking paintings and the animated statues, why am I surprised that the suits of armour can also move?*

The unexpected broadcast from Harry almost caused Sma to choke on her peas, though she was able to suppress the reflex. Masking her discomfort with a cough, followed by a sip of some wine, she returned her attention to her dining companions.

“Out of interest, Ms Sma--” began McGonagall.

“Oh, please, call me Diziet,” interrupted Sma.

“Quite,” McGonagall continued with deceptive mildness. “Might I ask what degree of schooling you have been able to provide your charge with thus far?”

Sma paused, her fork of gravy drenched mashed potato halfway to her mouth. She eyed the woman beside her, suddenly wary. Dumbledore was openly willing to play the politicking game; maintaining an eternal calm politeness while doing so. McGonagall, however, appeared to have little use for such charades, preferring to cut to the chase without the need for obfuscation. While Dumbledore had an air of approachability, making him the more dangerous opponent, McGonagall had the potential to force whatever issue caught her attention; a dangerous trait in its own way.

“I’ve tried to provide Harry a comprehensive, yet well balanced education in all aspects of life,” said Sma.

“Yes, I find him to be very mature for his age,” added Dumbledore.

“Manners make the man,” commented the small man, he barely reached Sma’s waist, seated on the headmaster’s other side. Dumbledore had introduced him earlier as Professor Flitwick, Hogwarts’ professor of Charms and the coordinator of the evening’s decorations.

“And what of his knowledge of magic?” pressed McGonagall.

“I imagine he knows more than some of your students and less than others,” Sma delayed.

It was obvious by McGonagall’s face that she planned to dig deeper into the extent of Harry’s supposed magical skills. Relief came, however, when the doors to the Great Hall were flung open to permit the entrance of a running figure. He was an unassuming looking man, remarkable only by way of his features being entirely unremarkable. He was dressed in standard wizarding robes and, to Sma’s amusement, had a purple turban wrapped messily round his head. His arrival caused the hall to grow silent as they watched him tear down the centre aisle in a desperate run.

“Troll! Troll in the dungeons!” the man shouted out as he skidded to a halt. He gasped for breath and muttered, “Thought you ought to know.”

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

Sma stared at the insensate professor and then inspected her meal, wondering what sort of hallucinogenic the locals had slipped into the food.

TBC...

Author’s Notes: So, that’s it. Harry has arrived at Hogwarts, just in time to have a run in with Quirrell’s troll. A surprisingly difficult chapter to write, all things considered. It was going just fine until about halfway through, then suddenly a bunch of plot holes presented themselves and forced an extensive rewrite. After all, things would be considerably different if Snape had his brains melts so early on.

Ah well, hopefully the next chapter will be a wee bit easier to put together.

Culture Shock First Impressions

Title: Culture Shock

Author: Ruskbyte

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Summary: Harry Potter has just received his Hogwarts letter, but really doesn't want to go. After all, who would want to live on a *planet* of all things? Especially one where the inhabitants still think nuclear energy is an advanced technology. And let's not forget the 42,000 light year commute.

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Chapter Six

First Impressions

\oOo/

Harry was beginning to wonder if perhaps some mischievous Mind had, when he wasn't looking, shunted his mind-state into an AI simulation core and was making him live out a wildly bizarre Virtual Reality scenario. It seemed a much more likely explanation than the idea that what he was currently experiencing was, in fact, real life.

~ *Say that again?* he prompted through his lace, replying to the message he had just received from Sma.

~ *There's a fucking troll running around inside the school*, repeated Sma, her displeasure with the situation almost palpable.

~ *A troll?* repeated Harry, the idea not fully registering in his mind.

~ *That's what the turban-wearing freak said*, Sma confirmed.

~ *What's a troll?* asked Harry. ~ *And should I be worried that there's one in the school?*

~ *Based on the planet's literature; trolls are large, dim-witted humanoids. Not very fast, but much stronger than your average Terrasa. The GCUs have observed several creatures that match the written descriptions, but have not been able to confirm the species name. I'd suggest you hurry back here, preferably before the thing manages to exit its location in the castle dungeons.* It was Skaffen-Amtiskaw that replied, as apparently Sma had decided to start cussing out Dumbledore in all of the ten local languages she knew.

"Oh, joy," Harry concluded.

~ *Do you know the way?*

~ *I'll have to retrace my steps back to Dumbledore's office and from there to the entrance.*

~ *Then do so. We will be waiting.*

~ *On my way.*

Concluding his conversation with Sma's escort drone, Harry turned to his own escorts. Butch was perched atop a nearby statue (a hideous replica of an extremely ugly looking hag) while Sylvester was waiting impatiently by his feet. Both small-drones were watching him expectantly.

"You both get that?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Sure did, Harry!"

Harry resisted rolling his eyes at the fake cat's enthused confirmation. He turned to look at Butch. "Can you lead the way?"

Feeling no need to give a verbal response, Butch took to the air and began gliding down the corridor. It kept a steady pace that allowed Harry to follow at a comfortable jog. There was no reason to dawdle, after all. They had just reached one of the school's many stairwells, when a piercing scream filled the air.

The drones continued to move, ignoring the sound as irrelevant to Harry's wellbeing. In point of fact they made note to avoid the direction their audio sensors indicated that the scream had originated from. If there was screaming going on, then it was very probable the troll's presence was the cause of it. Skaffen-Amtiskaw had been explicit in its instructions to keep Harry well away of any potential danger.

Harry, however, drew to an abrupt halt. Conventional wisdom in the Culture dictated that a person should think then act. Harry would never be able to explain why, upon hearing the cry of an unknown girl; he ignored that age-old adage and turned on a heel to dart down the nearest side corridors. It was certainly not that the person screaming was female (he could tell the sex by its pitch). Chivalry was not an alien concept to the Culture, but it was considered grossly archaic. But there was something, on a purely instinctual level, that drove him to follow the noise to its source and do what he could to help. He hoped that Sma would understand.

"Come on; it came from this direction," Harry urged as he ran, picking up speed with each step.

"This is ill advised," commented Butch as it trailed behind him

"That's right, Harry!" added Sylvester.

"Someone is in trouble!" Harry countered, not slowing his run. "Even if she is a Terrasa, I can't just leave her!"

Seeing that their charge was not going to be swayed, the two small-drones dutifully followed on his heels. Of course, their obedience did not prevent them from bringing themselves to full combat readiness. If the screaming was being caused by something dangerous, whatever it was would not live very long.

-oOo-

The Great Hall of Hogwarts was still rather crowded, despite the fact that Dumbledore had ordered all the students to depart to their dormitories. This was mostly due to the fact that everyone present; students, prefects and professors, were staring in disbelief as their headmaster's regal-looking guest verbally tore into the old wizard with a will that had to be seen (and heard) to be believed.

Having finally realized that the situation was real, and not a bad joke, Sma had rounded on Dumbledore and was swearing up a storm. She was cursing the man's ancestry, his professionalism, his integrity and his sanity. There were also multiple questions that brought his parentage, sexuality and competence into doubt. The entire hall was frozen in place, watching and listening in sheer disbelief that anyone could act in such a way, especially toward the headmaster. A few students, namely a pair of red-haired identical twins, were jotting down notes – recording her tirade for future reference.

"Just half an hour ago you assured me --*assured me*-- that Hogwarts was the 'safest place in all of magical Britain, if not the world'," Sma was complaining loudly, throwing Dumbledore's words back at him.

"Ms. Sma--"

Sma did not give him a chance to defend himself. "And what happens? This idiot," she paused to kick the insensate Professor Quirrell in the ribs, "comes running in, screaming about a troll! A troll! And you call this place *safe*?"

"Ms. Sma--" Dumbledore was beginning to lose his patience and it was reflected in the sharpness of his voice.

"I was expecting you to break your word," Sma continued, waving her arms about in agitation, "but I thought you'd at least wait a day before doing so!"

"Ms. Sma!" roared Dumbledore, his voice magically amplified and finally drowning out the woman's ranting.

"What?!" demanded Sma, turning back to glare balefully at him. "Why are you still here?"

"I am still here because you have not allowed me to leave," he replied curtly.

"You're the headmaster," Sma retorted. "Tell your staff to secure the safety of the children and then deal with the troll."

Giving in to his frustration, Dumbledore pinched the bridge of his crooked nose. "That is what I have been attempting to do, Ms. Sma. Your haranguing of me, while it may make you feel better, is not helping the situation."

~ *If you would stop yelling for a moment, I have some alarming news*, Skaffen-Amtiskaw unexpectedly transmitted. Sma's attention was immediately diverted away from the headmaster and to the waiting drone.

~ *What's happened?* she asked.

~ *I have received a report from Butch*, the machine relayed. ~ *They were on their way to the Entrance Hall when they heard someone screaming. Harry has abandoned his evacuation in favour of searching for the source. The drones have been unable to dissuade him.*

"What?" Sma whispered, her voice soft and utterly frigid. She glanced over to Dumbledore, who had turned away from her and was urging the students to leave the Hall and return to their dormitories. From the sound of it, he did not feel the need to have any of the professors serve as

escorts. Foolish of him, but not of any real concern to her. She looked to the drone at her feet. ~ *Go and help Harry.*

~ *And what about you?* asked Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

"Find Harry and kill anything in the vicinity that isn't Harry," ordered Sma, her expression dark enough to give even Dumbledore pause.

"Ms. Sma, I do not..."

Dumbledore trailed off as Skaffen-Amtiskaw rose into the air, eventually stopping at Sma's head height. The drone shifted its disguise field and reverted to its true appearance, rather than that of a faux leather briefcase. Everyone still in the Great Hall, of which there were a fair number, stared at the hovering drone in confusion or surprise; not sure what to make of it.

The drone twisted on its axis and orientated itself with the doors leading to the Entrance Hall. Mindful of the frailty of human ears, Skaffen-Amtiskaw pulled away from its partner at a much slower pace than it was capable of. This meant that it accelerated to only just less than the speed of sound, rather than beyond it. To the humans watching it, the drone disappeared in a blur of gleaming metal and a rippling vortex of displaced air. Once it was clear of the Great Hall, and the bulk of the students, Skaffen-Amtiskaw followed a course that traced Harry's progress further into the castle, as detailed by reports from Butch and Sylvester.

The only obstruction still in its way was one of the staff; the dark figure introduced as Professor Snape. The man had left the Great Hall almost immediately after Professor Quirrell's proclamation. Skaffen-Amtiskaw was forced to weave around the running man, ignorant and uncaring as to his purpose. Passing only half a metre from him as it sped by, the drone's passage blew Snape off his feet and into a painful collision with the opposite wall.

Skaffen-Amtiskaw was aware of this as it continued on, but paid it no mind. Snape was, ultimately, unimportant to its mission.

-oOo-

Harry skidded to a stop, panting and out of breath, and stared at the source of the scream that had captured his attention. cursory examination revealed that it was a bathroom of some sorts. Or the remains of one. The room had been battered into a state of such disarray that its original purpose was difficult to divine. Were it not for three surviving porcelain washbasins and the sole remaining toilet stall, he would have thought it nothing but an incredibly messy storeroom.

Standing in the middle of the room, taking up a surprising amount of space, was the troll. The creature was easily two and a half metres tall, maybe a little extra. Its arms and legs were thicker than Harry's torso and it was hefting a wooden club that was almost as large as Harry was. With a guttural bellow, the troll demolished the basin closest to it. Considering the size of the creature, there was little in the bathroom that was not close to it.

Another high-pitched shriek filled the air, emanating from the far corner of the room. There, cowering next to the last basin, was a young girl. She had been liberally drenched by water from the shattered basins and stalls, and then left with a sprinkling of dust and other debris. Her screams had to have caught the troll's attention, but the lumbering beast seemed more intent on causing further collateral damage, rather than making a proper attack against her.

"Bugger," Harry concluded, having taken in the scene.

Dismissing the idea of using his knife-missile, which would unnecessarily kill the troll, Harry considered his other options. Knowing better than to engage the troll, despite however robust the gelfield suit might be, Harry glanded a strong dose of *Focus* and concentrated on the girl's position. It was relatively difficult for him to Under-Jump someone that he wasn't in physical contact with, and even more difficult not to transport himself in the process, but it was far from impossible. The only complication was the troll, which had now lumbered further into the bathroom and was taking aim at the second to last basin.

Confident that he had an accurate feel of the girl's position relative to him, Harry began to shift and tweak the hyperspace energies. While his actions had a strong base in the Culture's scientific knowledge, there was no proper terminology to explain exactly what he was doing. It was, to the Minds' chagrin, as much of an art as a science. The inferior layer began to swirl about him in carefully orchestrated agitation and he gave it a sharp poke, triggering the Under-Jump just as the troll smashed the basin.

A wave of blinding dizziness washed over Harry like a cold shower. He was barely able to remain standing and staggered to lean against the doorframe, using it to support himself. Something had interfered with the Under-Jump, preventing the grid energy from forming properly. It was unlike anything he had ever seen. A quick look at the lower grid revealed a now churning mess of energy surrounding him that would be suicide to attempt any manipulation of.

Glancing across the bathroom, Harry could see that the girl's time was up. There was only the one washbasin remaining and it was the one that she was trying to hide beneath. The troll seemed to realize this and pulled its club back and around for one final swing. Knowing that there wasn't time to try again, he did the only thing he could think of. He shifted himself not into the lower hyperspace skein that lay beneath normal space, but up to the upper hyperspace layer that lay above it. The Minds would call it Upper-Jumping. The wizards would call it impossible.

Instead of the usual constrictive feeling of being sucked through a narrow tunnel, Harry felt as if he were swelling to enormous size. It went on and on, making him feel stretched to his limits and beyond. Then, like a rubber band snapping under too much strain, everything reverted to normal. The only change was that Harry now stood between the troll and the whimpering girl.

He had only enough time to realize his success, when the troll's massive club smashed into his side.

-oOo-

Hermione Granger was a sensible girl. For the past two months, since coming to Hogwarts, she had been a sensible witch. Unfortunately it seemed that most of her schoolmates had little use or appreciation for sensible witches. Ron Weasley in particular was awfully loud and vehement in his denunciations. His most recent attack against her was the reason she had spent most of Halloween hiding in the bathroom and crying her eyes out.

Despite being a sensible girl, Hermione had come to Hogwarts with certain expectations, some of which were perhaps a little naïve. This was not unusual and most of her fellow students had doubtless done much the same. Hermione had been expecting to be a little behind the pureblood students, who had been raised with magic. She had expected to have to work hard to prove herself. But her last expectation had been a little different. She had expected, for the first time in her life, to make proper friends. Not a wholly unrealistic expectation.

She most certainly had not expected to find herself under attack by a rampaging mountain troll.

She had been preparing to finally leave the bathroom, with the reluctant intention of joining the Halloween feast and getting a quick bite to eat (she had missed lunch) when she had come face to belly with the creature in question. They had stood there for several long seconds, both taking the time to process what they were seeing and then deciding what to do about it. The troll finally decided to play with her, like a cat with a cornered mouse. Being the sensible girl that she was, Hermione decided to scream in terror.

Hermione would not have said that she had lived a sheltered life. She was well aware of how cruel the world could be. Or at least, she understood the cruelty that children could so readily dispense. What happened in the bathroom was something entirely outside her scope of understanding. Physical violence and gratuitous destruction was something she understood in theory. Hermione understood a lot of things in theory. The theory, however, paled against the reality.

As the troll cut a proverbial swathe of destruction through the bathroom, drawing ever closer to her, Hermione screamed for all she was worth. All thoughts of magic escaped her head and she completely forgot that she had her wand in her robe pocket. Not that she knew any spells that could stop a troll. She could only hope and pray that the teachers; that someone, anyone, would come to her rescue. A small, snide voice in the back of her mind told her that nobody was coming and she would soon be dead. By the time the troll had demolished the toilet stalls and most of the washbasins, Hermione was beginning to think that the voice was right.

She was cowering behind what little cover remained; the last washbasin, when suddenly and inexplicably and impossibly, a boy appeared in front of her. He was about her age, perhaps a few years older, and dressed in obviously Muggle clothes. Sneakers, jeans, shirt and jacket. His hair was a messy tangle of black locks, which somehow managed to suit him. His eyes were a remarkable shade of green that she had never seen in anyone else before. She could see them grown wide in surprise and confusion.

A second later the troll's massive wooden club slammed into the boy's side with all the force of a runaway freight train. Hermione was so utterly surprised by the suddenness of the action that she failed to react. He was flung to the side like a rag doll, though not quite as limply as she would have expected. He hit the wall with a dull thwack, made louder by the crash of the mirror shattering as he impacted against it. To Hermione's disbelief, instead of collapsing in a bloody heap, the boy scrambled about, trying to remain upright.

"Fuck," he mumbled, swaying unsteadily on his feet.

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but paused. She was undecided on whether to thank him for coming to her rescue, or to scold him for nearly throwing his life away in such a foolish manner. A rumbling grunt from the troll made her completely forget about saying anything. Her gaze swivelled away from her would be saviour and towards the hulking creature that was now staring at the boy in obvious confusion. It obviously did not understand why the boy was not dead. For that matter, neither did Hermione. She watched in apprehension as the troll's puzzlement faded into anger. Clearly it was displeased with the intrusion, even if it was somewhat pleased with the result. It reared back, bellowed out a challenging roar and prepared to have another go at it.

Hermione was a sensible girl. So she did the sensible thing. She resumed her terrified screaming.

-oOo-

Harry's ears were ringing and he could have sworn that whole constellations were dancing in front of his eyes. His gelfield suit had been able to absorb the bulk of the impact he had received from the troll's club. It had even been able to extrude itself completely round his exposed head and hands before he had slammed into the bathroom's stone wall. None of this, however, was absolute in its protection. Harry still felt as though he had been kicked in the chest by one of Chomba's diaken hounds.

"Fuck," he groaned, trying to stay on his feet.

Pushing away from the wall he grabbed for the remaining basin, which had narrowly avoided destruction as he had barely missed being smashed into it. Using the porcelain sink to hold himself up, he took several deep gulps of air to recover from having the wind knocked out of him. He was vaguely aware of urgent queries from Butch and Sylvester, as well as from Skaffen-Amtiskaw, but he was too dazed to reply to them.

A loud guttural roar reached his ears, followed immediately by another deafening shriek from the girl. Realizing that something was obviously about to happen, Harry looked to see what was going on. He found himself staring up at the troll as it prepared for a devastating overhead swing. The sight left him frozen in terror, unable to move or act in any way, yet at the same time strangely detached – observing events with the curious analytical abilities of a Culture Referrer.

He knew, with absolute certainty, that the troll's attack would not be able to hurt him. At least not enough to make mention of. The gelfield suit would easily absorb and deflect the force of any blows that landed. At most, Harry would suffer a bruise or two if the club struck at a bad angle. Assuming the club even managed to strike the suit, which was more than likely generating a shielding effector field as an additional layer of protection. And then there was the fact that Butch and Sylvester were nearby. The drones could stop the troll in place without using even a fraction of their effectors' full power.

Yet, despite this knowledge streaming through the back of his mind, Harry was engrossed by the troll and its imminent attack. He could see the powerful coils of its muscles rippling and contracting beneath the thick grey flesh of its arms. He noted the gleam of anticipation in the beast's normally dull eyes. He watched as the club was hefted into the air above the troll's egg-shaped head, so high that it almost brushed against the ceiling.

"Fuck," he repeated, unable to think of anything else to describe the situation.

Just as the troll began its downswing, there was a deafening crack, like thunder striking overhead. The troll's massive wooden club exploded into a cloud of sawdust. At that very same moment the troll itself ceased to exist; reduced to a fine mist of blood and gore – an organic soup which sprayed out over the interior of the bathroom; including Harry and Hermione, thoroughly drenching them both.

Harry stood motionless, still frozen in place. The fact that the troll had been torn apart simply failed to register. It took several seconds before he moved, only a short blink of stunned disbelief. He blinked repeatedly, becoming aware that his vision was obscured by a thick film of translucent grey and red. Another moment passed before he realized that he was covered in something that was now slowly dribbling down the ultra-thin layer that the gelfield suit had extruded over his eyes. He absently used his neural lace to send a message to the suit's nodal brain, thanking it for keeping the liquidized troll from spraying into his eyes.

Still experiencing that same horrid feeling of detachment, Harry numbly lifted up his right hand and dragged it over his face. His attempt to clear the gore away was only moderately successful, as his hand was just as filthy as his face was. The effort was enough, however, to remove most of sludge that obscured his vision. With a series of nonplussed blinks, he looked around the bathroom and took note of the fact that he could easily blend into his surroundings.

~ Harry?

Ignoring the call to his neural lace, Harry was dimly aware of more screaming going on. Shrieks of pure terror and horror, even worse than what he had heard before. He turned, twisting at the waist, to see that it was coming from the girl. She had curled up into an even tighter ball of gangly limbs, all of which were just as blood-stained as the rest of the room, and was screaming into her knees with all of her strength.

~ Harry, are you all right?

Not knowing what to do, his emotions still strangely muted, Harry looked away from her. Ignoring the hysterical wailing, he noticed some movement at the door. Wiping at his face yet again, he could make out the hovering form of Skaffen-Amtiskaw. He vaguely realized that it was the drone that was trying to speak to him. He then took note of Butch floating in place next to the larger escort drone. The fake owl was not even bothering to flap its wings to remain aloft. A glance to the floor revealed Sylvester, sitting impatiently in the middle of the doorway.

It began to penetrate his befuddled mind that the combat small-drones were responsible for what had just happened. They had used their effector fields to tear the troll apart. As this thought was realized, Harry's neural lace supplied the memory of the troll's last moments. He could see the club being destroyed and then, in the very same instant, the troll... Remembering what had happened to the troll; Harry suddenly knew exactly what it was that now covered every exposed surface of the bathroom, like a grisly coat of paint.

"I'm gonna throw up," he managed to choke out, feeling his stomach twisting violently.

Unable to remaining standing, Harry dropped to the floor and clutched both hands to his abdomen in the hopes of staving off the rising bile. Some small part of his mind was pathetically grateful that the gelfield suit rolled away from his face as he began to vomit. Unfortunately this only served to expose his nose to the foul stink now permeated the bathroom, something that caused his stomach to heave even worse than before.

-oOo-

Skaffen-Amtiskaw turned into the corridor leading to the bathroom just in time to witness its two compatriots hit the troll with the full might of their military grade effector fields. By the time it had slowed to a halt outside the doorway, what remained of the troll had succumbed to gravity and had liberally coated the bathroom interior in a layer of grey and red sludge. If it had been human, it would have winced at the realization that this included Harry and the girl he had come to rescue.

After pausing just long enough to blast both small-drones with a stream of digital invective, the escort drone returned its attention to the gore covered boy that was now looking around in shock.

~ Harry? the drone queried, refraining from speaking while in the presence of the girl.

A soft keening reached its audio receivers and Skaffen-Amtiskaw realized that the native girl was rapidly growing hysterical. Her panicked screams continued to rise in intensity, soon reaching deafening levels.

~ Harry, are you all right?

Harry turned away from the girl and looked in their direction. His eyes flicked over Skaffen-Amtiskaw, not really taking in the drone's presence. He then peered directly at the hovering Butch and then down to the waiting Sylvester. There was a worrisome lack of proper expression on his normally animated face. Finally a small frown formed between his brows and he began to blink rapidly.

"I'm gonna throw up."

With that pronouncement, Harry sank to his knees and began retching. The gelfield suit peeled itself back from his face to allow him to expel the contents of his stomach. While hardly an expert in human psychology, the Skaffen-Amtiskaw had enough experience to understand the cause of

Harry's reaction. It sent a quick message to Sma, informing her of their location and condition. It then turned back to its young charge and contemplated what to do.

Studiously ignoring this rather disgusting biological process, and the resulting mess, Skaffen-Amtiskaw began to float further into the bathroom, intending to use its manipulator fields to pat the quivering boy's back. Sadly, drones were not very good at lending physical comfort to humans, but it was the best it could manage until Sma arrived on the scene.

To the machine's surprise, however, the girl suddenly sprang into motion and latched onto Harry with all the force of a limpet. Regarding the pair, it decided that she must have become aware of Harry's presence when he fell to the floor, bringing himself more fully into her line of sight than when he had been standing. Though why she would grab hold of the boy in such a manner was a bit of a mystery. The drone had thought her to be in a state of shocked hysteria and therefore unlikely to react to any outside stimulus. Some insight was to be gathered from her wild ramblings, which thankfully replaced her high-pitched screaming. It was, for the most part, nonsensical, but Skaffen-Amtiskaw did clearly hear the words "I'm sorry," and, "thank you," being repeated over and over again.

The drone waited until the worst of Harry's convulsions had ended. Once it felt that he was settled and once again capable of coherent thought, Skaffen-Amtiskaw tried to communicate to his neural lace. ~ *Harry? Can you hear me?*

"Yeah," Harry gasped, slightly out of breath.

"Thank you, thank you, I'm sorry, thank you..."

Ignoring the girl's continued ranting, Skaffen-Amtiskaw continued, ~ *Harry, can you use your lace? I'd rather not expose the girl to our conversation.*

"Right," nodded Harry. He paused, spat several times in an attempt to clear the taste of bile from his mouth, and nodded again. ~ *Right. Sorry.*

~ *It's all right, Harry. I understand.*

~ *Where's Sma?*

~ *On her way,* reported the drone. ~ *Don't worry, she'll be here soon.*

~ *Skaffy?*

~ *Yes, Harry?*

~ *This... stuff on me... it's the troll, right?*

Skaffen-Amtiskaw hesitated before finally answering in the affirmative. It promptly re-evaluated its decision to be honest when it detected a sharp rise in Harry's heart rate. His breathing was also coming faster, rapidly approaching a state of hyperventilation. His eyes were wide and the pupils dilated as he clutched a hand to his chest, pain gasps escaping his lips as he began to shake uncontrollably.

Realizing that the boy was descending into a state of hysteria, not unlike the still crying girl, the drone resorted to the slightly unethical action of jacking into Harry's neural lace and using it to stimulate his drug glands into secreting copious amounts of *Calm*. The effect was almost instantaneous as Harry's breathing slowed to a steady pace and his heartbeat dropped to something more appropriate to someone that was sleeping.

~ *Feeling better?* asked the drone.

~ *Yes*, replied Harry with a lethargic nod. He glanced up at the hovering drone. ~ *You jacked into my lace.* This would normally have been an accusation, but at the moment he was too calm to do more than make it a statement.

~ *I thought it best to calm you down before Sma arrives.*

~ *Right. Thanks.*

Skaffen-Amtiskaw moved closer to the kneeling children and settled down on the floor next to them. Unwilling to have its casing dirtied by the troll's remains, it used a field to clear the area where it landed. In the distance, the sound of frantic footsteps could be heard echoing through the castle hallways. Sma and the school professors were almost there.

"Well," Harry finally mumbled, "so much for Dumbledore's assurances of safety."

-oOo-

The Hogwarts' Hospital Wing did not meet Sma's standards for a modern and hygienic medical facility. Of course, Hogwarts itself did not meet her standards for a safe and nurturing learning environment. She was currently informing the headmaster of this particular fact. Loudly and repeatedly. It was perhaps a good thing that the infirmary was empty. Only Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey were present to hear Sma unleashed her vitriol. And the school matron's attention was primarily occupied by her two patients.

The pair had been found barely half an hour earlier; huddled together in a demolished bathroom with lots of liquidized troll painting the walls, floor, ceiling and the children themselves. It had taken five consecutive Cleaning Charms to remove the sticky mess from their clothes and bodies, though that had done nothing to clear away the cloying stench. Now, however, it was time to help them deal with the shock of such a gruesome near-death

experience.

"Keep your liquid crap and your pointy stick away from me, you crazy old quack!"

Apparently Harry shared Sma's opinion on the Hospital Wing. Certainly, he was less than enthused by Pomfrey's attentions, particularly the potion she had just tried to have him drink. The thick sludge had remained in his mouth only long enough for him to register the taste, before he had promptly spat it out with all the force he could muster. Madam Pomfrey now had a dark purple stain coating the front of her robes.

"Mr. Potter!" she yelled, backing away from him as he continued to expel the remnants of the Calming Draft.

"Ugh, good grief, and you call yourself a doctor?" asked Harry unhappily.

"I am a registered Healer and--"

"A fucking witch doctor is what you are," he interrupted. "Now keep back – you're not going to try any more voodoo mysticism on me!"

"Mr. Potter!" exclaimed Professor McGonagall. "We do *not* tolerate such language here!"

Harry looked at her, honestly puzzled, and asked, "What? Voodoo mysticism?"

While Madam Pomfrey did her best to tend to her very reluctant patient, Dumbledore was trying his best to placate Sma. This was proving to be extremely difficult, not unlike a council session with the Wizengamot. Standing just close enough to the two children to keep an eye on them, but far enough away that they could not be readily overheard, Dumbledore and Sma were locking horns with a will. Their argument had paused briefly when Harry rejected Madam Pomfrey's attempts to render aid.

Seeing that there was not likely to be an immediate resolution, the headmaster focused again on Harry's guardian and her companion. Dumbledore shot a glance to the hovering drone, which was waiting patiently at the woman's right. He turned his gaze back to Sma and asked, "And what of your... briefcase?"

"I prefer to err on the side of caution," replied Sma with a dismissive shrug.

"I have never seen anything quite like it," he prompted.

"I wouldn't believe you if you said you had."

"You told it to kill anyone it found in Harry's vicinity."

"Unlike you, I consider the safety of my charge to be of paramount importance."

Dumbledore could not stop a wince at the cutting observation. This incident with troll was turning into a debacle; one that he could not afford at such a delicate stage. Clearing his throat, he adjusted his half-moon spectacles and asked, "Admirable, yes, but do you often carry an animated guardian with you?"

Sma snorted inelegantly and replied, "You never know when you might need to massacre a dozen marauding bandits."

Dumbledore blinked at this answer and wondered if she was joking. He hopes were dashed as Sma's grim expression remained in place, completely devoid of any hint of black humour. She was also glowering at him in a manner that left him feeling like a naughty toddler caught filching his parent's wand. For a woman that he would estimate as only being in her thirties, this was extremely disconcerting.

"Now, headmaster," Sma began with all due seriousness, "we need to discuss Harry's withdrawal from this madhouse you call a school."

"Withdrawal?" Dumbledore repeated, not surprised by such a decision but appalled by its implications.

"You can't honestly expect me to allow Harry to attend a place where dangerous beasts can wander freely about."

"I assure you Ms. Sma, this is an isolated incident."

"One that just so happened to occur here and now?"

"Today was most certainly the exception, rather than the rule," Dumbledore tried to assert. Seeing that Sma was hardly convinced, he tried a different approach; one with the aim of downplaying the matter entirely. "In any case, this was hardly anything to get upset about. These things do happen."

Sma's face schooled itself into a façade of ice. Reaching into her overcoat, she withdrew an Espedair cheroot and raised it to her mouth. Once it was secured in her mouth, she released it and held that hand by its tip. A snap of her fingers signalled the watching Skaffen-Amtiskaw, who used its fields to apply sufficient heat to ignite the item. This was a carefully choreographed action, though little more than a cheap trick for Culture Contact operatives, which gave the illusion that Sma had used magic to light the cheroot. Dumbledore was entirely fooled by the charade.

Inhaling deeply, and savouring the bitter yet aromatic scent of the burning Espedair leaves, Sma regarded the headmaster with cool calculation. Taking hold of the cheroot, she pursed her lips and blew a stream of rich blue smoke into Dumbledore's face. It would not be diplomatic of her to express her ire by simply slapping the man, so she contented herself with this act of contempt. The old wizard bore the assault with as much grace as he could.

“Yes, these things *do* happen, headmaster,” Sma agreed. She jabbed the hand holding the cheroot at him, coming dangerously close to setting his beard alight. “But until they stop happening; Harry Potter will be attending school elsewhere.”

Seeing his chances to salvage the situation slipping from his grasp, Dumbledore resorted to begging. It was not a pleasant feeling, one that he had not endured in many, many years. Still, it was his best option at the moment, as he did not think that Sma could be swayed by intimidation. He suspected that her reaction to even veiled threats would be unpleasant – and most likely involve the use of her briefcase.

“Please, Ms. Sma, I beg you to reconsider,” he pleaded, reaching out to implore her.

“I have reconsidered,” said Sma. “That is why I’m removing Harry from this place.”

“You cannot do this!”

“Excuse me?”

“Harry Potter *must* attend school here, at Hogwarts.”

“And why is that?” Sma asked softly, dangerously.

“Every Potter for the last thirty generations has studied in these halls,” explained Dumbledore, back-peddalling rapidly. He could not let slip of his true reasons for wanting Harry under his care. He could not trust Sma with the truth, not until he had a far better idea of exactly what kind of woman she was. “By removing him from Hogwarts you will be denying him a chance to explore his heritage.”

“Harry couldn’t care less for a heritage that involves this decrepit hovel of a castle,” Sma immediately threw back. She could tell that the old man was lying and that his interest in having Harry at Hogwarts was for reasons far different than what he claimed.

“And has he told you that himself?”

“He doesn’t need to. I think I know what he would want better than you do.”

“So you would deny him the choice?”

“If it prevents him from being clubbed to death by a troll, then yes!”

Dumbledore drew himself up to his full height and called his magic to the surface. It was a tactic of intimidation, no more and no less, yet it was his last resort in the face of Sma’s stubbornness. Cornelius Fudge would have caved in without more than a token protest. Sma met his gaze without blinking and drew another deep breath from her cheroot.

“You assume that you will have an easy time of it,” he intoned.

“Are you planning on threatening me now?” asked Sma, exhaling in Dumbledore’s face once again.

“No,” Dumbledore admitted. He knew that magical, or even physical intimidation would not aid his cause at this point. As such, he planned on putting an entirely different strategy into play. The one card that he had not yet made mention of. “But I do not think you realize just how important young Harry is to the people of magical Britain. If need be, I can bring considerable political pressure to bear. You would have little option but to comply.”

Sma’s eyes narrowed as she asked, “And why would magical Britain care whether an abandoned orphan attends Hogwarts or not?”

Dumbledore’s eyes grew wide in surprise. He had not anticipated such a reply. “You cannot expect me to believe that you are unaware of Harry’s status as the Boy-Who-Lived-And-Vanished.”

“The Boy-Who-Lived-And-Vanished,” repeated Sma, utterly unable to believe what had just been said. Floating just behind her right shoulder, Skaffen-Amtiskaw was experiencing much the same. The pair exchanged a quick conversation through Sma’s neural lace, discussing what this might imply, before she focused on Dumbledore and asked, “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Harry is the most prominent symbol of hope to be seen since Voldemort rose to power in the seventies,” explained Dumbledore. As he spoke, he took careful note of the fact that Sma did not react in any way to the utterance of the dark lord’s name. “When he defeated him, the night his parents were killed, he became the very embodiment of what it means to be a champion of the Light.”

“A champion of the Light,” repeated Sma, even more incredulous than before. She shook her head in disbelief and asked, “How can anyone consider a year old baby to be a champion of anything?”

“As someone who was not living in England at the time, you cannot understand how hopeless the situation appeared,” Dumbledore replied, “There was nothing to prevent Voldemort and his followers from doing anything they desired. Some of us tried, certainly, but our efforts were seldom enough to do more than stem the tide. Harry changed all that. He gave us back the ability to hope for the future – for a safer and better life.”

“So you people put a baby boy on a pedestal and proclaimed him the new messiah,” concluded Sma.

“There was even talk of calling it Harry Potter Day,” admitted Dumbledore with a small grin.

Sma, however, was not amused. Spitting her cheroot to the floor and crushing under a heel, she fixed him with a look of pure disdain. “So that’s why you want Harry here at Hogwarts?” she asked, hands on her hips. “As some sort of tool, a figurehead for your political machinations?”

Dumbledore drew back at the accusation. “No, of course not!”

“That’s what it sounds like to me. If that’s not the case, then why the fuss?”

“I assure you, I have no desire to use Harry for political gain. There is no need; I am already Britain’s pre-eminent wizard,” Dumbledore assured her.

“Afraid of the competition then?” Sma accused.

“Ms. Sma!” exclaimed Dumbledore.

“Well?”

“My interest in Harry extends only so far as to ensure that he is given the opportunity to grow into the man his parents would have wanted him to become. James and Lily Potter were good friends to many people and dear friends to myself and several members of my staff,” Dumbledore explained. “I only want to do what I can to help the child learn about the world and culture that his parents loved so dearly. The world and culture that they sacrificed their lives to save.”

Sma studiously kept her eyes focused on the headmaster. Using her lace, she asked Skaffen-Amtiskaw, *~Well?*

Using the various sensors at its disposal, Skaffen-Amtiskaw had been carefully and thoroughly monitoring Dumbledore’s physiology. Everything from his heartbeat and respiration, to the dilation of his pupils and structure of his brain waves were observed, analysed and commented on.

~ He’s telling the truth, the drone concluded, *~but not the whole truth. He is omitting something.*

Without blinking Sma retorted to Dumbledore’s word with a biting, “You’ll find that Harry as learned of worlds beyond your comprehension. And he has grown up in his very own Culture. One that means far more to him than whatever he will find here in Britain.”

“How do you know that? How will he, if he is not given the chance to decide for himself?” countered Dumbledore.

~ Drone, contact the Minds, Sma ordered. *~ What’s their take on this?*

~ I’ve been passing everything along to the It’s Not My Fault, replied Skaffen-Amtiskaw. *~ General consensus is to placate Dumbledore for the moment by accepting his apologies. Ask for assurances and monetary compensation. Let him assume that we are willing to forget the incident.*

~ And if Harry really doesn’t want to come here?

~ Then he doesn’t have to. As we told Dumbledore earlier; there are plenty of other magical schools available. If what he says about Harry’s status as a celebrity is true, then they should be more than willing to accept him as a student.

~ All right.

Having given the impression that she was mulling things over, Sma looked at Dumbledore and started acting. “Very well,” she said. “I will accept that this was a one-off and not something that’s going to be repeated.”

Dumbledore loosed a sigh of relief and smiled at her. “Thank you, Ms. Sma. I assure you this--”

“Not so fast, headmaster,” Sma held a hand up to cut him off. “I will be needing some very convincing assurances that this won’t happen again. And I think, as a gesture of apology for putting your students through such a traumatising experience, that you fully refund the year’s school fees for both Harry and the girl.”

“Well, I--”

“I’m sure you won’t have any trouble having the money transferred back to Harry’s vault at Gringotts,” continued Sma, deliberately refusing to allow the man any chance to speak. “I also trust that you will supervise a full investigation into the matter – most especially in search of the answer as to how the troll managed to get into the school despite your so-called precautions against such things.”

“Yes, I--”

“And I think I will also insist that you have a hearing to determine the fitness of that Professor Quirrell person to be an instructor here. If he’s so pathetic as to faint when coming face-to-face with a supposedly minor problem, then I hardly think he is suitable to teach a class in Defence Against Anything.”

“Professor Quirrell--”

“That’s good to hear. Who knows, perhaps you’ll be able to prove that you and your staff are not wholly incompetent,” Sma concluded. “In the meanwhile, I will be taking Harry someplace where he can recover from tonight’s escapades. We’ll see you when we see you. Until then.”

“But what of your visit to Diagon Alley, tomorrow?” asked Dumbledore, visibly relieved that her list of demands had ended.

Sma gave him a look that instantly quelled any further questions. “That’s up to Harry. Now piss off and let me talk to my son.”

Shoving her way past the headmaster, Skaffen-Amtiskaw trailing behind her, Sma stalked to where Harry was sitting. She passed by the bed where Hermione was laying and graced the girl with a tight smile before settling down next to Harry.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" Sma asked softly, as she rubbed the small of his back with a gentle touch.

"Like shit," Harry admitted, "but I don't think I'm going to vomit again. Not unless that crazy doctor lady tries to give me another one of those 'potions'. How she expects her patients to get better when she's feeding them raw sewerage, I don't know."

"Good idea that," said Sma, smiling faintly. "You smell bad enough already."

"Fuck you too, Dizzy," retorted Harry, but with a ghost of a smile to take most of the harshness out of his words.

"Not for a few more years," Sma teased, hoping to brighten his obviously dark mood. "I'm not really into kids."

"More's the pity."

Sma reached up to ruffle his hair, pleased that he was at least well enough to return her banter. Her pleasure soured when Dumbledore's shadow fell over them, the headmaster having followed her to Harry's bedside. The old wizard smiled at the boy and said, "I'm most relieved to hear that you are well after what happened, Harry. I deeply regret that you had to suffer through such an ordeal."

"Thanks," Harry grumbled.

Dumbledore turned to the bed beside Harry's and added, "And you as well, Ms. Granger. It was good fortune that Mr. Potter was here to help you."

Hermione was staring silently at the group congregated around the boy that had saved her life, whom she now knew to be the famed and long missing Boy-Who-Lived-And-Vanished. Her thoughts were awl over the implications of this, but mostly she was replaying the memory of what had happened in the bathroom. Not the troll's rather brutal demise, which she preferred not to remember, but rather on what had happened immediately before that.

"You – you Apparated," she finally said, addressing Harry. "But... you can't Apparate or Disapparate in Hogwarts."

~ *She must be referring to your Under-Jumping* , reasoned Skaffen-Amtiskaw from its place beside Sma. ~ *We'd prefer that they not know any of the details of that particular skill; even if they have evidence that you can do it.*

"I've never learned how to Apparate," said Harry truthfully, "and I've never learned to Disapparate either."

"But--"

"I needed to get between you and the troll," Harry continued, not allowing her to make any further queries. "I don't know how I did it and I probably couldn't repeat it if I tried."

"No doubt a powerful example of accidental magic," theorised Dumbledore, stroking his beard.

"Harry's always pulling off something unexpected," agreed Sma, more for form than anything else.

"And what of the troll?" asked Professor McGonagall, listening quietly to one side. "While there is little doubt as to *what* happened, neither of you have supplied much of an explanation as to *how* it happened."

"The troll was trying to kill Harry. He stopped it. We don't need to know more," asserted Sma.

"Quite right," agreed Madam Pomfrey. "No reason to make the children relive what happened."

"Yes. Though I suspect that was a very impressive Blasting Curse, Mr. Potter," agreed Dumbledore.

"If that's what you call it," muttered Harry.

"Impressively foolish is what it truly was," countered Pomfrey. "I don't care what you say; an eleven year old's magical core is simply not developed enough to produce such a show of magic without draining itself to dangerously low levels."

"I feel fine," Harry insisted.

"You'd feel much better if you'd allow me to actually administer some potions."

"They taste like shit."

"Mr. Potter!"

Harry looked wearily at Professor McGonagall, beginning to tire of her constant admonishments. He turned back to Madam Pomfrey and stated, "I don't need your potions – I feel fine."

"If you won't take the Pepper Up, then at least have a Calming Draft," she insisted, making one last attempt.

"I already have enough *Calm* in my veins that I wouldn't be afraid a supernova," replied Harry.

Pomfrey huffed unhappily at her patient's obstinacy, but relented. She merely made a note to administer the bulk of Mr. Potter's future healing needs while he was either unconscious or looking the other way.

Seeing that his foe was relenting, Harry turned to Sma and asked, “Can we leave now?”

“Whenever you’re ready,” she replied.

Harry nodded firmly and thought back to the sensations he had felt when going to Hermione’s aid. He focused on his guardian’s position, sitting beside him, as well as Skaffen-Amtiskaw, Butch and Sylvester. Though he was feeling horribly tired, it was mostly a state of emotional exhaustion. His magical core, as Pomfrey called it, had hardly been bothered by the night’s activities. The superior layer of hyperspace grid energy swirled around him, quickly conforming to the pattern he desired. Without bothering to say goodbye to the professors and Hermione, Harry triggered the Upper-Jump.

The watching witches and wizard were shocked beyond all belief when their guests unexpectedly disappeared. There was no familiar pop or crack of Apparation, for that means of magical transport was impossible within the boundaries of Hogwarts. The only thing to mark Harry and company’s departure was the soft rush of displaced air and a tingling sensation that shivered up and down the spines of those left behind.

“Merlin’s bollocks!” exclaimed McGonagall, clutching a hand to her chest in surprise.

“Minerva!” chided Madam Pomfrey automatically.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows had jerked upwards so forcefully that his half-moon glasses had lost their perch and toppled to the infirmary floor. The implication that Harry could somehow circumvent entirely the wards protecting the school was shocking. Even more incredible was that a first-year should be able to do such a thing. Not to mention that he had somehow managed to include Sma, her briefcase and his two familiars in the transport without having to touch them. Clearly he needed to retire to his office to contemplate this; preferably while chewing on a lemon sherbet or two.

Yes, there was much to ponder.

-oOo-

The General Contact Unit *It’s Not My Fault* had been fully briefed on the subject of Harry Potter. If there was something to know about the boy, the Ship knew about it in mind-boggling detail. But even this comprehensive knowledge did not prevent the *Fault* from suffering a terrible shock when Harry, Sma and their three drone companions suddenly appeared in Harry’s quarters aboard the ship. If the *Fault* had been human, it would have jumped into the air, let out a piercing shriek and clutched a hand to its heart to quell the frantic beating caused by the adrenalin rush. As it was, the GCU spent nearly two full microseconds doing absolutely nothing but stare at the new arrivals, using its myriad sensor arrays. Finally, it recovered enough to address its clearly agitated guests.

“Well, this is unexpected,” it said, announcing its awareness of their presence. “The blister module I sent to retrieve you is still four minutes away from Hogwarts. I would hazard a guess that I can recall it?”

“Yes, we decided not to wait,” Sma confirmed.

“Why?” asked the Ship.

“Our escorts can fill you in.”

Skaffen-Amtiskaw, however, was trailing after Harry as the boy discarded his jacket while stalking across to the suite’s kitchen unit. The drone’s aura field was glowing a subdued pattern of purple and orange - expressing its concern for the young human.

“Ship, give me a glass of hot staol, please. Extra large,” said Harry, pulling off his sweater and tossing it aside. It landed on Sylvester, leaving the combat small-drone to wriggle its way out. The fake cat seemed to find the activity somewhat entertaining.

“Are you sure, Harry?” asked the GCU. “Staol is exceptionally alcoholic, especially when served hot on an empty stomach.”

“I didn’t ask for an opinion,” snapped Harry, unbuttoning his shirt. “Just give me the fucking drink!”

A hurried conversation with Skaffen-Amtiskaw convinced the Ship to acquiesce to Harry’s demands. Every Mind in the Culture was acutely aware of the many limitations and vagaries of their human progenitors. Especially when experiencing moment of great stress or emotional trauma. There was hardly a noticeable pause before it relented and said, “Well, if you’re sure then.”

Tapping his foot as he waited impatiently for the drink, Harry muttered, “Of course I’m sure.”

Sma, who had by now removed her coat, watched as Harry collected the steaming glass of liquor from the nearest dispenser, took a deep gulp of its contents, and then stormed out of the apartment’s reception area and into his bedroom. Draping the cream-coloured cloth over the nearest couch, Sma trailed after him. She entered the room in time to see him roughly kick off his shoes and collapse gracelessly on his bed, spilling some of his drink on the bedcovers in the process.

“Harry,” she asked softly, cautiously approaching the reclining boy.

“What the fuck happened today, Sma? What the grief was all that shit?” asked Harry in reply. He propped himself up on his elbows and took another swig of his drink. He looked at her, his expression vacillating rapidly between frustration and despair.

“I don’t know, Harry,” she admitted, sitting down next to him. “I honestly don’t know.”

Outside Context Problems are supposed to involve Elder civilizations, visits from extra-dimensional entities or an invasion by Andromeda," he protested loudly, knocking back the remainder of the stool. "Not a bunch of primitive barbarians that that can barely get out of their own gravity well!"

"It would seem we underestimated the... peculiarities... of these wizard folk," observed Skaffen-Amtiskaw, drifting into the room.

"You don't say?" retorted Harry scathingly. The drone's aura flickered cream with embarrassment.

"Forget the magic, Harry," interrupted Sma. "Let's talk about what happened in that bathroom."

"I heard the girl scream," said Harry. "I went to see what was happening."

"Over the protests of Butch and Sylvester," Skaffen-Amtiskaw noted.

Harry gave the drone a dirty look and argued, "How the fuck was I supposed to know that the fucking troll was going to be there? You told me it was in the fucking basement!"

Realizing that the stress of the situation, aided by the stool, was the cause behind Harry's crudity, neither Sma nor Skaffen-Amtiskaw chided him for swearing so much. There were, they both knew, other things to be discussed. Besides which, Sma had a habit of cussing up a storm whenever she was agitated.

"The small-drones say you Under-Jumped between it and the girl. She called it Apparating?" prompted Sma.

"Yeah, not really, no," Harry nodded and then shook his head. "Something about the school stopped me from dropping into inferior hyperspace. I don't know why, but I then tried going the other way – up into the superior layer. That worked, even if it did feel weird."

"We had always theorised that you might be able to Upper-Jump," said Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

"Well now you have the proof to go with your fucking theory!" snapped Harry, angrily tossing his empty glass aside. It shattered loudly against the bedroom wall, not far from where the drone was floating. "All I had to do was nearly get myself stomped flat by a fucking troll! Fuck! Don't you damn bastards even care about that!?"

"Harry, calm down," said Sma, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"I *am* calm!" he shouted.

"Then gland some more."

Harry hissed in frustration, but soon relented. He closed his eyes and secreted a strong dose of *Calm*, with a dash of *Diffuse*, which quickly succeeded in blunting the bulk of his emotion's sharp edge. Feeling a tad more reasonable than before, he turned to Sma and tremulously asked, "What about the troll? The drones killed it. They killed it - right in front of me. They - they - they blew it to bits..."

Sma immediately pulled him into her arms and enveloped him in the most caring embrace she could manage. "It's all right, Harry," she whispered, running a hand through the thick tangle of his hair. "It was your life or the troll's. The drones had no choice. You know that."

"But they killed it, Sma! Blew it to bits!"

"I know, darling, I know."

"But why?" he wailed piteously. "They didn't have to do that! Their effectors could've restrained it just as easily."

"Even Culture drones aren't immune to over-reacting," Sma told him, thinking back on some of her early experiences with Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

"It sprayed all over me. I had it – its blood, its insides – all over me... I feel... dirty..."

Suddenly reminded of the dreadful state in which she and the Hogwarts professors had found Harry, Sma realized that most of his problems lay in the rather messy way in which the troll had met its end. Cursing the small-drones for their lack of subtlety, she released her hold on Harry and pulled him to his feet. Giving herself some room to work with, she began to finish undressing him.

"Ship, can you get the shower running? Nice and hot," she asked.

"Of course," replied the *Fault*.

Sma glanced at the anxiously hovering Skaffen-Amtiskaw and said, "Drone, you'll have to report this to the Minds yourself. I'll be with Harry for the rest of the night. They can talk to us both in the morning."

The drone dipped a corner in acknowledgement. "I'll pass it along. Good night, Harry."

"Night," muttered Harry as Sma unbuttoned his trousers and slid them down his legs.

Once his clothes were removed, the gelfield suit disengaged itself from Harry's body. The quasi-sentient suit rolled itself up into a head-sized ball and floated out of the bedroom, heading for an appropriate cleaning facility. With both hands on his shoulders, Sma gently led him into the suite's bathroom and to the lavish shower stall. Quickly casting off her clothes, Sma took hold of him and stepped inside, allowing the comfortably hot sprays of water to wash over them both.

I don't think this'll help much," muttered Harry.

"It will help enough, don't worry," Sma whispered as she began to work a thick lather of soap over his hunched shoulders. "And then I'll start looking for whoever was responsible for this. And I'll deal with them appropriately."

-oOo-

[New M16-level Core Group formed. @n4.58.231.1933

Name: Interesting Times Gang (Act VI).]

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

My confidence in this operation has sunk to new levels.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Agreed.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

No kidding. This was very nearly a complete disaster – we almost lost Harry.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

He was in danger, yes, but it was hardly life-threatening. The gelfield suit was more than sufficient to prevent him from coming to harm. No, what concerns me are the psychological ramifications of the encounter.

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

Agreed. Few humans in the Culture are capable of facing such violence without a strongly negative reaction. Those that can are usually picked up by Special Circumstances. Young Mr. Potter does not fall under that category.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Something that will doubtless change if he stays on Terra for very long.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

Who could have anticipated that such an event would occur so soon after Harry's introduction to their society?

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Clearly you hold the Terrasa in far too charitable a light. They are not a very civilized people.

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

No, the *Different Tan* is correct. The probability of something like this happening is remote at best. I fear there is something about this situation that we are not aware of. Something sinister.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

A conspiracy of some sort? But how? Why?

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Difficult questions to answer.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

You are being ridiculous. Paranoid. The troll attack was but a coincidence. Nothing more, nothing less.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

And you are being obtusely narrow-minded. Again.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

It could be a coincidence, but the odds of that... well, I certainly wouldn't bet on it.

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

Nor I.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Then why, pray tell, would someone do such a thing?

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Dumbledore was lying.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Of course he was. But lying about what? That is the question.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

His mention of the restricted area, on the third-floor, is suspicious as well. There is something larger at work here.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

Agreed. But does it involve Harry or are we, as the *Tears* suggests, making a fuss about something that does not involve us?

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

So long as we have an interest in Terra, then it does involve us.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Agreed.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

Then, was Harry the trigger to the event? Or was his presence merely an accident?

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

I imagine that only time will tell. Our surveillance of Hogwarts was not as thorough as it could have been.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

You can only learn so much when working under the limitations we set for the GCUs orbiting the planet.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

I do not dispute that, but we were entering the situation blindly. That will change now that Harry has access to the school. The information that he and his drones will gather should help shed light on matters.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Assuming, of course, he does not decide to back out. This incident may well have damaged his conviction to see this through.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseis system, [solo]):

I doubt that. Harry will continue to do as asked of him. He is too stubborn not to.

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

He gets that from his mother.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Diziet Sma or Lily Potter?

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

Ms. Sma, of course. Don't be stupid.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

I'm a Culture Mind. I don't think it's possible for me to be stupid.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Have you listened to some of the drivel *Tears* has been spouting lately?

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

I beg your pardon! There is no call for such... such slander!

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Our conversation is getting somewhat off-track, as it were. What are our thoughts regarding the Terrasa situation?

~
x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

No change. Continue as planned.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

Agreed.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Agreed.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

And you call me stupid. Idiots. We cannot continue as planned. The situation has changed dramatically. Clearly Terra, and Hogwarts in particular, are more dangerous than we had anticipated. We must adjust our approach to reflect this.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Harry has a gelfield suit, a knife missile and two combat small-drones keeping watch over him at any one time. We hardly need to do any more to ensure his safety. Our concern should focus on gathering more data.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Agreed.

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

Agreed.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

Agreed.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

And what if matters escalate?

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Then we will act accordingly.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Until then we will do what we do best.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Watch.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

And wait.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Agreed.

~

[End document/comments track.]

TBC...

Culture Shock Diagonal Movement

Title: Culture Shock

Author: Ruskbyte

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Summary: Harry Potter has just received his Hogwarts letter, but really doesn't want to go. After all, who would want to live on a *planet* of all things? Especially one where the inhabitants still think nuclear energy is an advanced technology. And let's not forget the 42,000 light year commute.

/oOo\

Chapter Seven

Diagonal Movement

\oOo/

Dumbledore sipped on his tea and took a moment to relax. He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and allowed the sharp taste to sooth his nerves. It did not work as well as he hoped. Perhaps he should have dropped an extra cube of sugar into the cup. With a sigh, he opened his eyes and considered the three people sitting on the other side of his desk.

Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey were arrayed opposite him, each occupied with their own cup of Earl Grey. All had thoughtful expressions on their faces, though Minerva's was a tad on the pensive side and Severus seemed more irritated than anything else. Of course, having had his shoulder dislocated and his collarbone broken, it was hardly surprising that Snape was even less sociable than normal.

"So, Poppy," Dumbledore began, breaking the silence, "what can you tell us?"

"While you're asking about Harry Potter, let me just say that Hermione Granger is in perfect health, though understandably shaken up," Madam Pomfrey reported. She took a long taste of her tea and then continued, "As for Mr. Potter, aside from his refusal to be properly treated--"

"He refused your ministrations?" asked Snape, looking across to her.

"Yes," Pomfrey ruefully confirmed. "He seemed rather distrustful of my 'voodoo mysticism'."

Snape turned to the headmaster, a gleam of vindication in his black eyes, and said, "It would seem the Potter blood breeds true; the boy hasn't been Sorted yet and he's already proved to be just as arrogant and egotistical as his father."

Dumbledore levelled a flat stare at his Potions Master and stated, "Actually, Severus, I found Harry to both polite and attentive."

"James Potter and his friends were perfectly able to charm their way out of trouble when they needed to," Snape countered with conviction. "Mark my words; his son will be no different."

"You seem strangely certain that the boy takes after James and not Lily," said McGonagall, eyeing her colleague narrowly.

"You saw the boy, Minerva," argued Snape, "he might as well be his father reincarnate."

"Yet he has Lily's eyes," said Dumbledore softly. He could see the impact his observation had on the acerbic man, as Snape swiftly settled back and stared sullenly into his steaming teacup. Dumbledore turned back to Pomfrey and prompted, "Forgive the interruption, Poppy. Please continue."

"I am at something of a loss, Albus," Pomfrey readily confessed.

"In what way?"

"I was unable to do as thorough an examination as I would have liked, not with the way he was shifting about, but what I have learned..."

There was something ominous about the way the matron trailed off, yet there was no hint of actual worry in her voice. Instead, she sounded puzzled,

as if confronted by something she did not understand.

Dumbledore set his teacup down and asked, "What is it, my dear?"

"Well, you hardly need a magical scan to tell that Mr. Potter is far ahead of his year-mates in terms of growth. If I didn't know better, just by looking at him I would think he was a third year. The scan I made showed hormone levels closer to a thirteen year old, rather than an eleven year old."

"Are you saying that he's been aged somehow?" asked McGonagall. "Through repeated use of a time-turner perhaps?"

"No, not at all," Pomfrey shook her head. "The spell to determine age showed Mr. Potter to be eleven years and three months old. While he might *look* older, he is not older than he should be. Somehow, I suspect it might have something to do with his upbringing; he's years ahead of where he should be."

"Interesting," murmured Dumbledore.

"Bloody impossible would be a better description."

"Really? Why do you say that?"

"It's not just his physical appearance," elaborated Pomfrey. "There are several aspects of his physical condition that I simply cannot explain."

"And what might those be?"

"I could find no trace of his tonsils or appendix. None. At all. Even with the best magical healing available, there's always some small indication to show that they were there and were then removed. As far as Mr. Potter is concerned, however, it's as if he hadn't been born with them."

"Perhaps they were removed using Muggle methods," suggested McGonagall.

Madam Pomfrey snorted at the absurdity of that idea. "Impossible. I've treated plenty of Muggleborn students who have suffered under a Muggle doctor's butcher knife. They all have *very* clearly defined scarring compared to magical methods."

Dumbledore sipped his tea, considering the implications of this. Needing more data to form a proper theory, he asked, "Anything else?"

"His eyesight is perfect, as is his hearing. In fact, they're better than perfect and I think his other senses are similarly advanced," Pomfrey recited, ticking off her fingers as she spoke. "Reflexes and hand-eye coordination are also exceptionally high. The only student close to his level is Oliver Wood. This is on top of greater than average muscle and bone density, as well as superb body tone and near optimal weight for his height. He'll be the best Quidditch player of his generation if he decides to fly professionally."

Pomfrey paused to allow her audience a chance to absorb her words. A glance at Snape, who was glowering fiercely, prompted her to add, "And if he chooses the sensible thing and stays on the ground, well, he might prove to be the best academic of his generation. I don't have anything conclusive, but there were indications of considerable neurological activity, even though he was doing nothing but sit in a hospital bed."

Dumbledore pursed his lips and steepled his fingers in front of him. One or two of these things might have been a coincidence. Perhaps merely an indication of just how well Diziet Sma had raised the boy. But put all together, they painted a worrisome picture. "What of his magic?" he enquired.

"His magical core is slightly above average, but not enough to remark upon. Still, he somehow managed to recover almost all of his energy in half an hour; this after having Apparated inside the school and then firing off a Blasting Curse strong enough to utterly destroy Quirrell's mountain troll."

"Did you detect any indications of possible ritual magic usage?"

This question brought all three of the headmaster's guests to an abrupt halt.

Professor McGonagall immediately protested. "Albus, you honestly can't think that Harry Potter would use dark rituals to enhance himself!"

Snape arched an eyebrow high and nodded, "I have to agree. Not even the most ambitious and foolhardy children of the dark families would consider such a thing. Even if he did, how would he be able to do it? The knowledge of such things is hardly likely to find itself in the hands of an eleven year old brat."

Dumbledore looked over the rim of his spectacles and met the gaze of both Minerva and then Severus. "I am not concerned that Harry might have done this," he informed them, "his adopted mother, however, is a very likely suspect."

"Dragon dung, Albus!" snapped Pomfrey, drawing attention back to her. "I'll have you know that Harry Potter is completely and utterly free of any trace - any trace at all, of dark magic. Merlin's sake, the boy has the lowest levels of external ambient magic affecting his body than I've seen since the Prescott girl in the seventies. A single bottle of butterbeer would probably double it."

"Really?" asked Dumbledore, greatly surprised by this. "Then how would you explain his exceptional health?"

Madam Pomfrey gave him a flat look and answered, "You'd be amazed what a healthy lifestyle can accomplish, Albus."

-oOo-

It had no name. It did not have enough of a mind to warrant such a defining characteristic. Instead, it was identified by a somewhat lengthy base-nine serial number that also described its purpose.

It was a spy. Well, the euphemistic term would be; surveillance microdrone, but in truth it was much the same thing. No larger than a house fly and disguised to resemble one; it existed for the sole purpose of observing the world around it in as unobtrusive a manner as possible.

It was currently perched atop the portrait of Gonville Bromhead, Hogwarts headmaster from 1879 to 1890. Bromhead was too busy feigning sleep to notice it and the four humans currently in the headmaster's office were completely unaware of its presence.

It did exactly what it had been built for. It watched. It listened. It transmitted everything it perceived to its creator.

The General Contact Unit *It's Not My Fault* paid close attention.

-oOo-

Diziet Sma was watching the slow and steady rise and fall of Harry's chest when the Ship contacted her. Polite to the proverbial fault, as almost all Culture Minds were, the GCU did not risk the chance of waking the sleeping boy.

~ *Ms. Sma?* it called through her neural lace.

~ *Yes?* Sma replied, not breaking her vigil.

~ *I have been monitoring Hogwarts via a series of microdrones since your return last night*, the Ship informed her. ~ *One of them is currently observing a conversation taking place in the headmaster's office. I think you would like to hear what is being said.*

Shifting slightly, Sma finally allowed her eyes to slide away from her charge's bare torso. ~ *Can you summarise?*

~ *Of course, though I believe you would lose much of the context*, the Ship replied.

Sma considered this for a moment. She knew that the *It's Not My Fault* would not have interrupted her and Harry's morning for anything that was not important. Minds were like that, though their definition of important was occasionally vastly different from a human's. She turned her gaze back to Harry and reached out to wrap a hand around his waist, drawing him into a tight hug.

~ *I'm going to gland some Quicken*, she told the Ship. ~ *Can you give me a compressed feed until I'm caught up?*

~ *Of course.*

Releasing a small dose of *Quicken* from her drug glands, Sma watched and felt as the utility drug caused her perception of time to greatly speed up. The rise and fall of Harry's chest grew longer and longer, as did the faint beating of his heart against her naked breasts. Once she felt that the *Quicken* had fully asserted itself within her system, she sent of a brief, ~ *Ready*, and then waited for the Ship's download.

The image feed from the microdrone began to form in her mind's eye, nebulous and blurry around the edges until she concentrated, at which point it coalesced into a much clearer picture. She ignored most of the extraneous information that accompanied the images and sound. She had no need to know the body temperature of each participant, nor how much oxygen was being inhaled with their every breath, nor how much carbon dioxide was present when they exhaled. Instead, Sma simply watched and listened.

She immediately recognised everyone present in the headmaster's office, not even having to use her neural lace to remind her of their names. There was Dumbledore, of course, as it was his office. Professors McGonagall and Snape, who appeared to be his confidants and advisors, were also present, as was the school's matron; Madam Pomfrey.

The standard morning pleasantries went by rather quickly. Apparently Snape was feeling somewhat grouchy after having been injured the previous night, though he was unsure of the cause of his injuries. Dumbledore and McGonagall informed him of the actions Skaffen-Amtiskaw had taken to reach Harry, causing the dour man's face to shutter closed of nearly all emotion. Despite his impressive impassivity, Sma could still discern his anger. Dumbledore gave the customary offer of tea, which was accepted all round. She absently noted the preferences of all four people, just in case such knowledge was needed in the future.

Then the conversation itself began. Sma's thoughts on Snape's animosity towards Harry were confirmed as the man not so subtly, but still politely, began to denigrate the boy in question. His remarks about James Potter seemed to explain the attitude, but his almost instant withdrawal at the mention of Lily Potter was interesting. Sma wondered what Harry would make of it, his skills as a Referrer making him better suited to reach the correct explanation. She almost lost focus on the feed as attention turned to Pomfrey, who began to detail her report on Harry's health.

~ *What the fuck? How could she know all that?*

~ *Apparently she used her magic wand*, replied the Ship. The perpetual neutrality of its tone gave its observation a strangely sarcastic tinge. ~ *From what Skaffen-Amtiskaw observed last night that was the only action she took, aside from trying to feed Harry those magical potions of hers.*

~ *Seriously? She learned all that by waving a wooden stick back and forth?*

~ *Apparently.*

Sma continued to listen intently and then asked, ~ *Magical core? Do you know what they're talking about?*

She received the mental impression of a shrug and heard the Ship reply, ~ *Not in the least. There is a significant degree of Grid Energy*

permeating Harry's body, but nothing concentrated enough to call a 'core'. We do know that he causes a bit of a ripple in both skeins, wherever he goes, but we haven't seen anything similar with the other magical Terrasa we have observed.

The next bit of conversation confused Sma slightly, as well as leaving her feeling a little bit indignant. ~ *Ritual magic usage?* she repeated with a huff. ~ *Do they honestly think I'd go about sacrificing virgins and invoking the auspices of whatever unholy dark gods exist in their pantheon merely to make my Harry better than them? Are they stupid?*

~ *That is a matter of some debate* , supplied the Ship, sounding slightly amused.

Sma grunted and turned her ear, so to speak, back to what was being said.

"I know, but really," said Dumbledore in response to Pomfrey's jab about clean living.

"You're worrying needlessly, Albus," Pomfrey asserted. "Just because the boy is as fit as a fiddle doesn't mean he needed rituals get there."

"Neither of his parents was in possession of such extraordinary health."

"James was a typical wizard in regards to his way of life, Albus – his diet was hardly what I'd call well-balanced. And Lily was always more fond of her books than she was of running about. Their son, however, seems to know how to take proper care of himself."

There was a brief lull in conversation as the others considered the matron's words.

Dumbledore ended the silence by taking a sip of his tea and proclaiming, "Thank you for the reassurance, Poppy. I do not claim to be totally without concern, but you have eased the bulk of my worries."

"Yet that won't stop you from watching the boy like a hawk for every second he's inside the castle," observed Pomfrey.

"You know me too well, my dear," Dumbledore smiled.

"And his guardian?" asked Snape.

"I have spoken to Alastor and he will be taking a holiday to Cape Town later this week," answered Dumbledore, still with a smile. "I imagine he will keep an eye out for anything of interest while he is there."

"That will do as a background check, headmaster," Snape acknowledged, "but what about the woman herself?"

"We will do what we can to investigate her, Severus, I assure you," said Dumbledore. "However, that will require finding her first."

"You have no idea where she and Potter are staying?"

"None whatsoever. We will have to wait until she contacts us."

"And what of my meeting with them today, Albus?" asked McGonagall. "After what happened last night, I wouldn't be surprised if they cancelled, but should I be there in case they do show up?"

~ *We're coming up to the present* , the Ship informed her in an aside.

"I thiinnnnkkkkk tttthhhhhhhaaaaaa---"

Sma gave a mental wince as Dumbledore's words slowed down and distorted, her perception of time running several times faster than normal. Having caught up on all that had been discussed prior to her interest in the conversation, Sma flushed the *Quicken* out of her system. With the drug no longer accelerating her thought processes, Sma watched as Harry's chest soon began to rise and fall at a normal pace, rather than in extreme slow motion. In her mind, the image transmitted by the microdrone sped up until the incomprehensible drone of Dumbledore's distorted voice returned to something understandable.

"---aaaaattttt wwwee can expect Harry and Ms. Sma to be there, as agreed," the headmaster finished. "She strikes me as a woman of her word."

"Very well, Albus," McGonagall relented. "You will take my classes for the morning?"

"I look forward to it," Dumbledore grinned boyishly. "It will be a pleasant change from the usual paperwork."

"Do you want me to do anything while in Ms. Sma's company?"

"No... no, I don't think that would be prudent. Merely talk to her – learn what you can."

Checking her neural lace, Sma found that it was still a couple of hours before she and Harry were due to meet with the deputy headmistress. That was good, as they would need the time to prepare for the encounter. Harry needed to be informed of the situation in the school and then coached on how best to react to it.

~ *Can you Displace something into the castle?* Sma asked of the *It's Not My Fault* , continuing to listen to the conversation with half an ear.

~ *Of course* , replied the Ship. ~ *Provided it is not alive; there is a lot of interference in the Hyperspace skein surrounding the school.*

~ That's fine , Sma assured the GCU. ~ Now, I'm going to dictate a letter that I want you to Displace to Dumbledore's desk...

-oOo-

Dumbledore was in the process of buttering his croissant (he had chosen some French cuisine instead of the usual scones) when a tiny pinprick of light appeared directly in front of him, suspended several inches above his desk. In the blink of an eye that dot expanded into a shimmering silver sphere that disappeared with a soft whuff of displaced air. The headmaster blinked in surprise as a neatly folded letter dropped onto his desktop.

"What the devil?" exclaimed Snape, jumping up from his chair and drawing his wand.

"Calm yourself, Severus," said Dumbledore, waving for the man to retake his seat.

"A letter? But how did it arrive?" asked McGonagall. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I," Dumbledore admitted, setting his croissant aside.

Erring on the side of caution, he did not move to pick up the letter, but rather leaning over to examine it first. It was a simple sheet of crisp white paper, precisely folded in three. There was no seal or anything similar to prevent a third party from reading it illicitly. Its grain was thick enough, though very fine, that he could not see any impression of whatever had been written on its inside.

"Muggle paper by the look of it. Not any kind of parchment," he concluded. "Very fine quality as well. Whoever sent it is obviously not lacking in wealth."

"Why would any wizard use Muggle paper to send you a letter?" asked Snape.

"I have the suspicion that our correspondent is in fact Ms. Sma," answered Dumbledore.

Drawing his wand, Dumbledore held it over the letter and began to cast the standard set of detection charms that he used whenever he received unsolicited mail. Malicious letters, frequently cursed and jinxed to do harm to the reader, were a thing he had to deal with on the semi-frequent basis. But nothing he cast returned any reaction. There did not appear to be any charms or curses or hexes upon the paper. There were no compulsions or subliminal suggestions. No privacy wards or security precautions.

It was as if the letter was utterly untouched by magic, which he had trouble believing. Beginning to wonder, he cast a slightly different charm. Again the letter did not react. Dumbledore was perplexed by this, as that last charm was designed to detect the presence of magic. The lack of reaction could only mean that the letter was completely devoid of any spellwork or magic.

"Albus? Is something wrong?" asked McGonagall, wondering at the headmaster's reaction.

"No," replied Dumbledore. "I cannot, however, find any trace of whatever method was used to deliver this letter to us."

"What does it say?" asked Madam Pomfrey.

"Let us find out," replied Dumbledore, unfolding the paper and holding it up in front of him. He cleared his throat and began to read the letter out loud.

*Dear Professor Dumbledore,
Despite the events of last night, we have decided to allow Harry's enrolment at Hogwarts to continue. I trust you will remember the conditions we require for this matter to be settled.
As agreed, we will meet with your deputy, Professor McGonagall, outside the Leaky Cauldron public house in London at 10 o'clock this morning in order to purchase Harry's school supplies and other necessities.
Sincere regards,
Rasd-Codurersa Diziet Embless Sma da' Marenhide*

"What are these conditions she's talking about?" asked Snape sharply.

"A complete refunding of both Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger's school fees for the year, as well as undertaking a full investigation into how the troll managed to enter the school," elaborated Dumbledore, passing the letter across to Professor McGonagall. He made no mention of Sma's other demand; that of an inquiry into Professor Quirrell's competence. He needed the Defence Professor in place, now that Harry would be attending classes.

"Nothing that you shouldn't have offered yourself," observed Madam Pomfrey.

"Allowing Potter to attend for free? Are you intent on letting the boy lord his supposed superiority over the other students?"

"Really, Severus, you should give the boy a chance to prove himself before condemning him."

"Blood will out, Albus, blood will out."

"Ten o'clock," said McGonagall, reading through the letter with her own eyes before handing it to Pomfrey. "They've set the time back by an hour, but we will still have more than enough to get everything done before returning to Hogwarts."

"Will Mr. Potter be returning with you?" asked Pomfrey.

"I expect so," McGonagall nodded. "That was the arrangement."

"That would be perfect; we could hold his Sorting during dinner," said Dumbledore.

"Are you sure you don't want to do it in private?" asked Snape. "In the Great Hall during dinner would be a spectacle."

"I do not think young Harry would be bothered by the attention."

McGonagall nodded in agreement and said, "Yes, he did seem at very ease yesterday, despite the incident with the troll."

Dumbledore nodded as well and asked, "Have you discovered anything in that regard?"

"Nothing conclusive," Snape replied. "Tracing its path, from where Quirrell reported it to be, I would say that it entered the school through the West Rose Courtyard. By the tracks left in the lawn outside, it must have wandered down from the northern edge of the Forbidden Forest."

"Do you know how it came to find the second floor girls' bathroom?" asked Pomfrey.

"Only that to reach it, it would have had to move in the opposite direction from the dungeons."

"But Professor Quirrell saw it in the dungeons..."

"So he says."

"And what of the Stone?" asked McGonagall.

"I had thought to check on that first, on the chance that the troll was merely a diversion," Snape grudgingly admitted. "Unfortunately the Sma woman's briefcase incapacitated me when it flew by."

"Do not fear," Dumbledore assured his staff. "I too made a point of checking on the Stone's defences. None of the perimeter wards were triggered, nor is there any evidence of anyone having entered Fluffy's chamber."

"Do you think Severus is right? Was the troll a diversion?" asked McGonagall.

"If so it was hardly a subtle one."

-oOo-

Professor McGonagall stepped into the Leaky Cauldron ten minutes before the agreed upon time. A quick Cleansing Charm removed the dust and ash that had accumulated on her robes during the trip through the Floo.

"Professor McGonagall, this is a surprise," announced Tom, the barkeeper. "What brings you to the Cauldron in the middle of term?"

"Hello Tom," acknowledged McGonagall, moving to greet the man. "I'm here on Hogwarts business; to escort a student that is only now joining us."

Tom glanced around and leaned in close to whisper, "Are the rumours true then? Harry Potter's returned?"

Wondering, not for the first time, at the speed at which gossip travelled, Professor McGonagall merely inclined her head. "I trust you can be discreet about this, Tom," she cautioned, "We'd prefer not to endure any hubbub."

"Mum's the word," Tom agreed.

"Thank you. I'll be meeting Mr. Potter and his guardian outside. We'll be coming through to the Alley in a few minutes. Could you clear the way?"

"Of course, of course."

Walking across the pub to the entrance, Professor McGonagall pulled open the door and walked out into Muggle London. Though she would never admit it to anyone, not even Dumbledore, she was always left feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable when visiting the city. Perhaps it was an aspect of her animagus form, but she always held a slight and irrational fear that one of the many Muggle automobiles would lose control and run her over. There were just so many of the things flitting about.

McGonagall waited patiently to one side of the Leaky Cauldron's door, her eyes scanning back and forth as she tried to spot Harry Potter and Diziet Sma's arrival. The chimes of Big Ben striking ten o'clock began to resound through the city and McGonagall pursed her lips. Unless they were coming via some magical means of transport, her companions were going to be late. She had just finished that thought when a London taxi cab pulled up to the pavement some distance down the street. It was with no small amount of relief that she watched as Harry and Sma stepped out of the vehicle.

The *It's Not My Fault* had delivered the pair to the planet surface using the same blister module that had transported them to Little Whinging. The module, invisible and silent, had dropped them off in London's Hyde Park, where they caught a taxi to carry them to their final destination. Timing their arrival to be perfectly precise had been a challenge, and an iffy one at that, but the various Minds involved had able to tweak matters appropriately.

The professor watched as the two unloaded a pair of sizeable suitcases as well as a carrier for Harry's feline familiar, Sylvester. The boy's owl, Butch, swooped down from above and settled atop the nearest streetlamp. Eyeing the luggage, which Harry was dragging behind him on built in

wheels and handles, McGonagall had to wonder exactly what the young wizard had packed in them. Heavens knew that a standard trunk would not be able to hold the contents of both, at least not without an expansion charm of some sort.

"Professor McGonagall, good morning," said Sma once she and Harry had paid their fare and crossed the remaining distance.

"Ms. Sma. I see you brought your briefcase as well," acknowledged McGonagall.

"I never leave home without it," replied Sma.

"Why are you pretending to carry it?" McGonagall asked, eyeing the escort drone cautiously. While she had little information of exactly what Sma's companion was capable of, she did know that it was able to move under its own power.

"We'd prefer not to draw too much attention to ourselves."

"After the events of last night, I'm afraid that's something of a lost cause."

Sma looked at McGonagall in surprise and asked, "How would anyone here know about that?"

McGonagall affected an amused expression and replied, "You would be surprised."

"The Leaky Cauldron," read Harry, looking up at the sign hanging over the pub door. He glanced over to the professor and asked, "Isn't it a bit risky, having such an obvious name for the entrance to your shopping district?"

"Not to worry, Mr. Potter, the doorway is well hidden beneath a wide range of Muggle repelling wards," McGonagall assured him.

Sma, who was taking a look at pub herself, arched an eyebrow and asked, "Are you sure it's working?"

"Of course," asserted McGonagall, as if the very idea were absurd. "Otherwise we would be attracting a great deal of attention."

~ Then why am I not having any trouble seeing the damned thing ? wondered Sma, directing her silent query to Harry and Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

~ Perhaps something about your physiology affects the way it works, the drone conjectured. *~ Since our arrival we have been passed by nineteen Terrasa, none of which seemed to notice our presence.*

~ I'm betting on the neural lace, said Harry. *~ By all accounts native technology is too primitive to withstand the background HS energy generated by 'magic'. Culture equipment, however, can continue to function with almost no trouble. The lace must be able to filter the interference these so-called wards cause.*

"Shall we go?" prompted McGonagall, indicating for Harry and Sma to precede her.

"Yes, let's," agreed Sma. "I'm very eager to visit Gringotts and discuss Harry's financial situation."

Somewhat leery of the idea that someone she didn't know would have access to the Potter vaults, McGonagall contented herself to a curt nod. It would not do, after all, to antagonise someone whose abilities were mostly unknown. Still, that would not prevent her from keeping a very close eye on Ms. Sma. Hopefully she would have something useful to report once the day was done.

"Could I shrink your luggage for you?" she offered.

"Shrink my luggage?" repeated Harry.

"Yes, I think it would be easier to have them in your pocket rather than having to drag them along all day."

"Well, uh, sure. So long as you can unshrink them when we get to the school."

Ignoring Harry's slight misgivings about her ability, McGonagall drew her wand and tapped each suitcase, shrinking them down to the size of a pack of cards. Harry seemed very impressed by this as he picked them up, turning them this way and that. Having confirmed that the process had not damaged or otherwise affected the suitcases, he slipped them into his inside pocket. The deputy headmistress took another moment to shrink Sylvester's carrier, though only after Harry had released the cat within. Shrinking living creatures was never a good idea. She had to forcibly hold back a frown as Sylvester slinked by. Her own feline instincts, courtesy of her animagus form, were giving her the equivalent feeling of raised hackles. There was something very odd about that cat.

After waiting for Butch to descend and find a perch on Harry's shoulder, she followed the pair into the pub. She was not surprised when they were immediately accosted by Tom, as the barkeeper was wont to do whenever people in obviously Muggle clothing entered his domain. This time, however, his interest had more to do with *who* had stepped inside, rather than out of any need to properly greet them.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Potter," Tom greeted quietly, taking care not to attract any attention. "Welcome back, welcome back."

"Er... thanks," nodded Harry, shaking the man's hand. "It's, uh, good to be back home."

"Wonderful to hear you say that, Mr. Potter. We were horribly concerned when you vanished all those years ago."

"Don't worry, I was perfectly safe. Dizzy here took proper care of me."

After Harry had pointed to Sma, who was standing next to him, Tom rounded on the woman and grabbed her by the hand. "Thank you so very much, Miss," he gushed. "It's a relief to know that Harry was in good hands."

Having dropped Skaffen-Amtiskaw in surprise when Tom began vigorously shaking her hand, Sma smiled winningly at the man and tried to extract her hand from his surprisingly firm grip. "It was a pleasure," she said. "I've always tried to treat him as if he were my own."

"And I can't thank you enough, Ma'am," continued Tom, still shaking her hand up and down.

"Please Tom," said McGonagall, stepping between the two. Sma shot her a thankful look. "We have a lot of business to attend to."

"Of course," Tom nodded. He said his goodbyes, which involved another round of handshakes, before retreating back behind the bar.

"If you'll follow me," prompted McGonagall.

"Is everyone going to act like that?" asked Harry.

"Fortunately not. Tom is merely more enthusiastic than most. Still, I expect you will receive a fair number of such displays of gratitude," said McGonagall as she led them through the main tap room and out the pub's back door. Navigating round a pair of dilapidated garbage bins, she came to a halt in front of a plain brick wall.

"Not exactly a grand access way," commented Sma, looking over the old and grimy bricks.

"Mediocrity is much easier to hide than grandeur, Ms. Sma," McGonagall countered.

With an economic series of taps, McGonagall was too staid to use a flourish, the entrance to Diagon Alley was revealed. She watched closely as both Harry and Sma took in the sight of Britain's magical shopping district. Their reactions were quite dissimilar. Sma barely raised an eyebrow and observed the narrow alleyway and its various stores with a calm curiosity. She had seen more impressive things, as well as things much worse. Harry, on the other hand, was much less subtle in his reaction. His eyes were wide in what McGonagall at first hoped was amazement, but a moment later she reassess her opinion. She saw this look fairly often, when escorting some of the more conservative and upper crust Muggle-born students on their orientation.

"What a dump," Harry finally managed, luckily slipping into Marain and thereby avoiding offending McGonagall too much. Still, even though she did not understand the words, she could clearly hear the emotion behind them.

"It is not Harrods, I know," said McGonagall, saying what she told everyone that had such a reaction, "but I think you will find Diagon Alley to have a certain rustic charm not present in the Muggle world."

"It looks rather... cramped," said Harry as they began to walk.

"Yes, well, the Alley was built over a thousand years ago. While the shops and buildings have been replaced, at one time or another, the original street itself has remained almost unchanged. There is some degree of tradition about it."

"Is that Gringotts?" asked Sma, directing their attention in the direction they were walking.

"Yes, the wizarding bank," confirmed McGonagall. "I presumed we would be going there first, to acquire funds for the day."

"Amongst other things, yes," Sma nodded.

Harry regarded the bank as they approached. It was by far the most impressive building to be seen in the Alley. Certainly it seemed much less likely to topple over without warning. As they reached the steps leading up to the bank doors, he noticed a pair of short figures flanking the entrance on either side. They were clearly not human, though they were humanoid. He recognised them as goblins, thanks to the comprehensive reconnaissance recordings taken by the *It's Not My Fault* and the other two GCUs.

Pointing them out to his companions, he asked, "Who are they?"

"Those are the Gringotts Entrance Guards," answered McGonagall as their party paused to give the two sentries a once over. The pair studiously ignored the scrutiny; remaining perfectly erect and their halberds upright. "Only the best goblin warriors are assigned to the position."

"But what are they standing there for?"

"Show," Sma promptly supplied.

"Show?" repeated Harry, mirrored a moment later by a surprised McGonagall.

"Yes; to show that the goblins are rich and powerful and important enough to have armed flunkies stand around all day doing nothing."

McGonagall, who had been listening intently, almost tripped on the stairs as she stared incredulously at Sma. The armed flunkies in question had to settle for glaring balefully at Culture woman.

A puzzled Harry looked from Sma to the goblin guards and back. "But, doesn't everyone already know that?"

Sma smiled indulgently at him and, hand on the small of his back, prompted him back into motion and across the bank's threshold. "You still haven't fully grasped the concepts of wealth and power, or the psychology behind them, have you?"

Inside the bank Harry and Sma wondered at the hustle and bustle going on all around them. There was much more going on than Sma had ever seen in any other bank, though there were some resemblances. Harry, however, was staring about the place with wide eyes and a complete lack of comprehension. He could not understand why there was so much fuss over what amounted to pieces of metal.

“This way,” said McGonagall, leading them to an available teller.

The goblin, whose nose was remarkably long and pointed, was busy writing in a thick and musty ledger. He was using a quill made from a particularly bright and fluffy feather which Harry’s neural lace informed him was from a bird called a peacock. He also ignored the three humans utterly.

“Excuse me,” McGonagall prompted after a long moment.

Without moving its head, the goblin turned his eyes to his customers. With a grunt, he set the quill aside and closed the ledger shut with a loud thump. Finally lifting his head to more fully regard them, he asked, “Yes?”

McGonagall indicated her companions and introduced, “This is Mr. Harry Potter and his adoptive mother, Ms. Diziet Sma. They wish to make a withdrawal from the Potter trust vault as well as other business.”

“Indeed,” the goblin drawled. He looked from Harry to Sma and back. “And do you have your vault key, Mr. Potter?”

“I have it,” said Sma, drawing the goblin’s attention back to her.

“Very well, I will have someone escort you to the vault. Is there anything else?”

Ignoring the bluntness of the dismissal, Sma nodded again and stepped up so that she was leaning against the counter. This subtly emphasised her full height, nearly half a head taller than Professor McGonagall. “Actually,” she said with a sly smile, “I’d like to arrange an account of my own. You are able to transfer funds from a non-magical bank, correct?”

The goblin cocked an eyebrow and nodded. “Of course. We deal with all the major monetary institutions.”

“Excellent,” said Sma. She handed over a slip of paper. “These are the details to a business account I hold at the Bank of England.”

“Vavatch Corporation,” read the goblin.

This was the name of the principal front company that the Culture had created on Earth for its Contact operatives to draw funds from. In something of a private joke, albeit a morbid one, it was named after an orbital that had been destroyed during the Culture-Idiran War. While only a couple of months old, the various bank accounts under the Vavatch Corporation name were more than sufficient for the purchase of several small islands. Maybe even a big one.

“Would a standard Gringotts business account suit your needs? Or would you prefer something with more security?”

“A standard account will be fine.”

“And how much do you want transferred into your new vault?”

Sma’s smile developed a faint edge as she stated, “Oh, not too much. Say ten million Galleons. Minus charges, of course.”

The goblin rocked back, staring at her with wide eyes. “Ten million Galleons?” he repeated. He cleared his throat and asked, “Are you sure?”

“Always.”

“Very well,” managed the goblin, quickly gathering himself. “It will take some time to arrange for the vault and the transfer. Everything should be ready by the time you’ve finished your business in the Potter vaults.”

“That will be fine,” accepted Sma. “And the paperwork?”

“You can fill that out now.” He rummaged about his desk and settled several sheets of parchment out before her. “Here it is. We will need your signature at the designated spots, here, here, here and here. Lastly, you must sign in blood here.”

“In blood?” repeated Harry incredulously.

“Yes, in blood. Otherwise it wouldn’t constitute a properly binding magical contract,” the goblin explained.

“Very well,” Sma accepted with a grimace. She took the proffered peacock feather quill and began to write. As she scribbled on the parchment she said, “While I’m busy, could you get a full accounting of the Potter finances? Since they’ve been inactive for the past ten years, we’d like to see what state they’re in before deciding what to do with them.”

“An account summary will be here momentarily, Ms. Sma,” nodded the goblin.

~ *They seem very good at what they do* , commented Harry silently to his companions.

~ *That's to be expected. From what we've been able to observe of their society, the pursuit of wealth is held above all else* , relayed Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

~ *But why?* asked Harry. ~ *What good does it do to have lots of gold?*

~ *Essentially it comes down to the concept of greed; wanting more than what they already have.*

"A copy of the files you requested," announced the teller, having just been handed a thick sheath of parchment by passing goblin.

Sma, who was now signing her name in the designated spots, thanked the goblin and asked, "How do I go about signing this in blood?"

The goblin looked over the sheets she had been working on. "Almost done? Good." He reached beneath the counter he was seated at and withdrew a quill, which he held up for display. "You must write your final signature using this contract blood-quill."

The quill, made from a raven's feather, gleamed sinisterly as he handed it to her. Sma examined the quill, trying to see how it would accomplish its purpose, but found it to be no different than the quill she had just been using. With a slight shrug, she turned back to the account agreement and began to write out her name. A sharp pain in her hand, however, stopped her after only the first letter.

"What the fuck?" she exclaimed, dropping the blood-quill and looking at her hand. A small cut was present on the back of her palm, bleeding slightly, and shaped identically to the single character she had managed to write.

"Never used a blood-quill before, eh?" asked the goblin with a vicious grin.

"Why is it cutting into my hand?" Sma demanded through clenched teeth.

"To spill the blood needed to finalise the contract," the goblin answered. "Don't worry; you'd have to sign thousands of contracts before it will leave a scar."

"Barbaric," muttered Harry, drawing a glance from the goblin.

The teller bared his teeth and sneered, "Do not blame us for your own squeamishness, Mr. Potter."

Harry huffed indignantly and countered, "Surely there must be a more civilised way to do it?"

"Doubtful. The old magics are the strongest and most reliable. Only a fool would seek a different way to accomplish what they can do," retorted the goblin with an air of finality. He returned his focus to Sma and asked, "Well? Are you going to sign or not?"

Grimacing at the idea, Sma nodded and began to secrete the appropriate painkillers from her drug glands. Feeling herself properly prepared, she reclaimed the blood-quill and scratched out her name as quickly as she could without appearing to be in a hurry. She absently mused that it was a good thing she had signed using only her familiar name; Diziet Sma, rather than with her full name. Once finished, she stoically set the blood-quill down and pushed the document towards the goblin.

"Let's see," the teller murmured, picking up the contract.

"Are you all right?" asked Harry anxiously, grabbing Sma's hand to inspect the injury.

"I'm fine," Sma assured him. "It's just a scratch. I'll have it looked at when I get home."

"I don't think that's necessary, Ms. Sma," said McGonagall. She drew her wand and held it over the bleeding cut. "May I?"

Sma considered the deputy-headmistress' offer, ignoring a weary communication from Skaffen-Amtiskaw, and gave a curt nod. McGonagall waved her wand back and forth, and with a muttered word the wound disappeared. Harry, who had been more than a little doubtful about this method of healing, stared in disbelief at the unblemished skin of Sma's hand. He ran his fingers over the area in question, not trusting what his eyes were showing him.

~ *Impossible* , commented Skaffen-Amtiskaw incredulously.

"I may not be as talented as Madam Pomfrey, but I can heal such minor injuries," said McGonagall.

"Thank you," said Sma, just as amazed as Harry, but hiding it better.

"Everything is in order," announced the goblin teller, drawing their attention back to him. "I will have this filed and properly recorded while you are seeing to the Potter vaults." A snap of his fingers summoned another goblin to them. "Grabnuck will escort you to the vaults."

"Follow me," directed Grabnuck gruffly.

Retrieving Skaffen-Amtiskaw from its place on the floor, Harry and Sma dutifully trailed behind the goblin, with Professor McGonagall keeping up the rear. The witch made note that Harry did not release his grip on Sma's hand as they walked.

"You know, I rather like this," said Harry to Sma, speaking in Marain.

Sma gave a soft sigh at her ward's insistence at avoiding English whenever possible. Instead, using the same language, she asked, "Like what?"

Harry gestured towards themselves (including McGonagall) and Grabnuck. "This," he said. "The goblins are shorter and smaller than us."

"Why would you like that?"

"It's nice to be bigger for a change," replied Harry. "Think about it. Most of the other species the Culture deal with are bigger and stronger than us. There's the Homomdans, the Chelgrians, the Iridans, the Affront..."

"I get the idea," said Sma, holding up a hand to forestall the growing list.

"I'm just pointing out that it's a nice turnaround," concluded Harry.

Sma chuckled softly. Looking up, she realized that their guide had drawn to a halt and was staring at them with unfettered curiosity. A glance backwards revealed that Professor McGonagall was doing the same. "I'm sorry," she apologised, "but Harry's a bit stubborn when it comes to speaking in English."

"What language was that?" asked McGonagall.

Grabnuck leaned closer, trying not to make it obvious that he was listening closely.

~ *Oh shit, Sma, I'm sorry* , Harry transmitted through his lace. He suddenly realized that it would be rather difficult for Sma to explain his and her usage of an extra-terrestrial language.

~ *It's okay, Harry* , she reassured him.

~ *But what can we say?* he asked frantically.

~ *Sometimes the best kind of lie is the unvarnished truth* , contributed Skaffen-Amtiskaw, entering the silent conversation. ~ *Especially when they cannot confirm or deny its validity.*

~ *That actually works?*

~ *Certainly. Watch and learn, Harry.*

"It's called Marain," Sma said to McGonagall. "It's the primary dialect of our Culture."

"Really? I've never heard of it before," the professor probed.

"Not many people here speak it."

McGonagall nodded thoughtfully. She turned to Harry and asked, "I gather then that English is not your home language?" On Harry's silent nod she raised both eyebrows a fraction. "You speak as if you have spoken it all your life."

Harry shrugged. "I had to learn when we decided I'd be going to Hogwarts."

At this the professor's eyebrows shot up almost to her hairline. "But it was only a few months ago that we sent off your acceptance letter!"

He smirked and replied, "I learn quickly."

-oOo-

The shop was narrow, shabby and just as dilapidated as the rest of Diagon Alley. Set above the door was a wooden signboard, painted a dark green with faded and peeling gold letters that declared, *Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC* . There was only a single window looking out onto the cobblestone street that wound through the alley. Displayed on a moth-eaten purple pillow was a single, elegantly carved wand.

Harry sent a weary glance to Sma before following Professor McGonagall through the door. While his guardian was well used to the relatively primitive conditions to be found on non-Culture worlds (not that there were all that many planets in the Culture), Harry was still trying to get used to it. Thanks to the meticulous nature of most Minds and drones, the Culture was a place considerably cleaner and more orderly than what he had encountered on Earth thus far. The seemingly mindless repetition of Privet Drive had been tolerable, despite the village's lack of individuality. Hogwarts was about what Harry had expected to find in a castle built out of stone blocks. Diagon Alley, however, was a place that he found almost intolerably crowded and ramshackle. He was not enjoying the experience.

Stepping into the wand shop, Harry found that the inside was not any better. The interior of the store was narrow and cramped, packed from floor to ceiling with shelves and shelves that extended into shadow. Piled upon these shelves were a great many narrow boxes, stacked in neat towers, one atop the other, that left scarcely any free space available.

"Ah, Harry Potter."

Harry spun round and saw an old man to one side of the entrance, standing alongside Professor McGonagall. He was dressed much as every other wizard Harry had thus far encountered, though he looked a tad on the dusty side. Much like the rest of the shop really. His hair was a wild mass of white surrounding his head like a halo of clouds. His eyes were unnaturally pale for a Terran and were focused unblinkingly upon Harry with alarming intensity.

"You are late, Mr. Potter," the man announced. "I had been expecting you some time ago."

“Mr. Potter, this is Mr. Ollivander, the proprietor,” Professor McGonagall introduced.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Harry nodded.

“Indeed, Mr. Potter, indeed. The honour, I dare say, is mine.” Ollivander turned his gaze to the person that had entered after Harry. He regarded her with the same unnerving intensity. “And you would be young Mr. Potter’s adoptive mother.”

“Yes, I am,” said Sma. She made a show of looking about the shop and asked, “There are wands in all these boxes?”

“Indeed,” Ollivander confirmed. “Each wand is different and no two are exactly alike.”

“We’d like to buy some wands then.”

“Wands? As in the plural? Do you wish to purchase one for yourself as well, Miss...?”

“Diziet Sma,” she told him. “And actually I’d like to buy a hundred wands.”

Ollivander blinked, the words simply not registering properly. Professor McGonagall, standing alongside him, had much the same reaction. “One hundred wands!” he finally managed to exclaim, “Whatever for?”

Sma gave him the matter-of-fact answer, “To take them apart, of course.”

“Take them apart?” repeated Ollivander breathlessly, sounding horrified by the very idea. He stood perfectly still, staring at Sma for a long while before he managed to stammer out a weak, “I have some old pre-owned ones, if you’d like.”

“Those would be fine,” Sma allowed with a gracious smile.

“Perhaps we should find Mr. Potter’s wand first,” prompted McGonagall, having recovered from her own surprise at Sma’s request for so many wands.

“Yes, yes,” Ollivander stepped up to Harry and withdrew a silver tape measure from his pocket. “Which is your wand arm, Mr. Potter?”

“Wand arm?” repeated Harry dumbly. He understood what the old man was referring to, of course, but was too put off by the absurdity of the question to bring himself to answer it.

“Which hand do you write with?”

Writing was hardly something widely practiced in the Culture, though every school-aged child was taught how. For the most part people used either keyboards (considered somewhat antiquated and quaint) or they simply dictated whatever they wanted to record. Harry, who had not written anything in several years, took a moment to remember.

“I write with my left hand, sir,” he answered.

“Indeed? Both your parents were right-handed, as I recall.”

“You knew my parents?” asked Harry as Ollivander released the tape and watched as it began to measure its way about Harry’s body. He repressed that part of him that wanted to know how it was doing this. Skaffen-Amtiskaw was doubtless recording everything. They could speculate about it later.

“I remember every wand I have every sold, Mr. Potter. Every last one,” Ollivander told him.

“What wands did my parents use?”

“Your mother’s first wand was made of willow, with a unicorn hair at its centre. Ten and a quarter inches long. Your father, on the other hand, was selected by a mahogany wand with a dragon heartstring core. A powerful wand. Eleven inches long.”

“You say the wand selected James Potter,” noted Sma. “What do you mean by that?”

“It is the wand that chooses the wizard, Ms. Sma. Or the witch,” replied Ollivander.

“How could an inanimate piece of wood, with some dead animal remains choose anything?”

“Magic, my dear lady, magic.”

“Right.”

“That will do,” Ollivander decided and the tape measure rolled itself back up and dropped to the floor. Ignoring the discarded implement, the wand maker returned to where Harry was standing, several boxes piled in his arms. “Now then, Mr. Potter. Let’s begin, shall we? Here we go; Oak and phoenix feather. Exactly twelve inches. A common enough combination and length. Good as a benchmark. Go on – give it a wave.”

Harry grasped the wand that Ollivander handed him and stared blankly at it. It looked like nothing more than a nicely carved stick of wood. He could feel a slight tremor in the hyperspace skein, but hardly enough to worth mentioning. He glanced to where Sma was standing.

~ Skaffy?

~ *It's a wooden stick with a bird's feather sealed inside. Nothing out of the ordinary*, said Skaffen-Amtiskaw.

"Today, Mr. Potter," prompted Ollivander.

Relenting to the strange man's order, Harry weakly waved the wand about. He had barely managed to move his wrist back and forth before Ollivander suddenly leaned in and snatched the wand away from him.

"Clearly not," he said, setting the wand aside and presenting another to the perplexed boy. Once Harry had the new wand in hand, he recited, "Fourteen inches, willow, containing one unicorn tail-hair."

Again Harry focused all of his senses on the wand. Again he found nothing to suggest that it was anything more than it appeared to be. Seeing that Ollivander was watching expectantly, and little impatiently, Harry sighed in resignation and gave this other wand a wave.

"No, no, no," Ollivander proclaimed, almost instantly snatching the wand away as well.

"I get the feeling that this is going to take a while," commented Sma, addressing her remark to Professor McGonagall.

McGonagall nodded slightly and said, "Sometimes it does, but Mr. Ollivander usually finds a match after half a dozen tries or so."

This prediction, however, soon proved to be false. The pile of discarded wands began to grow, soon reaching the point where they had a tendency of rolling off the counter and falling to the floor with a clatter. Ollivander, however, scarcely seemed to notice. Indeed, the wand maker seemed to grow more and more delighted with each failure. Apparently he considered Harry to be quite the challenge to his wand matching skills.

"A tricky customer indeed, Mr. Potter, but not to worry – we'll find a match for you somewhere." Ollivander paused, as if struck by an idea. He appeared to ponder for a moment, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "I wonder – yes, why not?" He dashed back into the very depths of the shop and returned a minute later with a box that he held almost reverently. "Holly and phoenix feather – an unusual combination that requires particular attention when creating it. Eleven inches."

Harry took hold of the proffered wand and swished it about with the same frustrated resignation that he had used for the last dozen wands. Ollivander watched him with eager anticipation. When nothing happened, Harry waited a moment – expecting the man to grab the wand away from him, as he had done with all the others. A glance to see what the delay was showed that Ollivander had instead affected an utterly perplexed expression. Harry gave the wand a second wave, the first he had managed thus far. Again, nothing happened.

"Very strange. Very strange," Ollivander muttered.

"Do we really need one of these things?" asked Sma, who was sitting tiredly on one of the available spindle chairs. Her interest in Harry's wand selection had waned into boredom after the first dozen wands had proven incompatible. She checked the time on her wristwatch, a concession to Terran fashion, and saw that they had been there for nearly an hour.

"I don't understand it," Ollivander shook his head.

"Perhaps Mr. Potter is a *very* tricky customer," suggested McGonagall, also looking somewhat bored by the proceedings.

"It can't be – at least *one* of the wands should have had *some* reaction to the magic he puts into them," countered Ollivander.

"Wait," Harry held up a hand to forestall the man from reclaiming the wand. "I'm supposed to channel, uh, *magic* through the wand?"

"Of course you must, lad," Ollivander confirmed. "How else do you expect to see if your magic is compatible with the wand?"

"Oh." Harry resisted the urge to blush. "Perhaps you should have told me that *before* we went to all this trouble."

Ollivander blinked owlishly at the young boy and asked, "Do you mean to say, Mr. Potter, that your magic hasn't touched any of the wands? Remarkable for one so young to have such control over their magic. Most children cannot prevent their magic from leaking into the wands, which is why I only ever need for them to give the wand a wave or two."

Straightening up in preparation, Harry took a deep breath, closed his eyes and focused on the Hyperspace Grid. Drawing from both available layers, he directed the grid energy to flow through his body, gathering it in his left hand. Opening his eyes, he held the wand out in front of him and gave a sharp flicking motion, whilst at the same time releasing the energies he held within him. The result was much more than he had expected. Or anyone else for that mattered.

A wave of concussive energy exploded out of the wand tip, racing out and flattening everything in its path. There was a loud crash as the shop window exploded outwards, spraying shards of shattered glass out into the alley. The front counter careened backwards until it crashed into the shelves, which had themselves been blown sideways and toppled over by the blast. Wooden beams splintered under the strain and impact, sending tiny slivers of wood flying into the air. Boxes of wands were scattered about like leaves caught in a hurricane; their contents flung around as their lids were knocked open. Some of the wands were caught in the wake of the energy blast and were in turn tossed throughout the shop interior.

If this happened with every customer that passed through the doors, then it was a wonder the building was still standing, Harry mused. Thinking that this had to be conclusive proof that the wand was compatible with him, thereby ending this rigmarole, he smiled and gave the wand in question a satisfied smirk. The expression fell off his face as he realized that the wand had been reduced in length by half – clearly unable to withstand the strength of the grid energy that had been forced through it.

Harry looked at the smouldering stub he now held. "Bit too much, huh?"

He tried not to wince as, in the very back of the shop, a section of ceiling collapsed.

-oOo-

It had taken another half an hour before the group were able to leave Ollivanders. Most of this time involved Professor McGonagall repairing the damage, while Mr. Ollivander tried to coach Harry in using enough magic to register with the wands, yet not destroy everything before him. The deputy headmistress had three close calls before he managed to find the appropriate level of intensity. He also destroyed a further five wands in the process, much to Ollivander's dismay and Sma's not so secret amusement.

In the end, however, everything was resolved and Harry left the shop with a wand of his own. It was eleven and two thirds of an inch long, carved from Sequoia sempervirens wood, harvested by Ollivander's grandfather during the American War of Independence, and containing a phoenix feather core. Sma, after very little haggling (everyone involved was too tired to put up more than a token effort), emerged with a large box containing a hundred second-hand wands of all combinations and sizes. This included the six wands Harry had accidentally destroyed.

As it was shortly after noon the trio delayed the remainder of their shopping trip for a quick lunch at the nearby Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour. While Professor McGonagall had a rather sedate cup of tea, with a blueberry muffin, both Harry and Sma indulged in wide variety of sweet confections that left the deputy headmistress wondering if Madam Pomfrey's conclusions about Harry's health had been accurate or not. Even Ron Weasley would have been hard pressed to eat so much in a single setting - though doubtless with far less acceptable manners.

After finishing up with a large chocolate, banana and bubblegum swirl milkshake, which they shared like a pair of teenagers on a date (to McGonagall's disquiet), Harry and Sma spent a good fifteen minutes complementing and charming Florean Fortescue himself into a starry eyed daze. Finishing with the ice-cream parlour, the group, trailed by Butch and Sylvester, made their way to the next stop on their shopping trip.

Harry, who still had trouble understanding the concept of shops and stores, decided that Flourish and Blotts was more like a library than anything else. Much like Ollivanders, though considerably larger, the store was filled with shelving that reached from floor to ceiling and stretched back as far as he could see. Books of all shapes and sizes were stacked throughout, some even piled haphazardly on the shop floor.

"Wow," he breathed in honest awe. McGonagall actually cracked a pleased smile, though she quickly hid it.

"This *is* impressive," agreed Sma, craning her head back to view the stacks.

"The largest bookstore in Britain," announced the shop manager, coming over to them. He looked pleasantly surprised as he said, "Professor McGonagall, it's a rare treat to see you in the middle of a term."

"We have a student that's only just joining us," explained McGonagall, indicating to Harry.

"Ah, I see," the man nodded. He looked Harry over and asked, "So, a standard set of third-year books I gather. What electives are you taking?"

Harry, who was examining a nearby book (*The Really Big Book of Really Big Things*) that was actually taller than he was, stifled a giggle and corrected, "Actually I'm only starting my first year at Hogwarts."

The manager blinked in surprise and looked Harry over a second time. "Really?" he asked. "You don't look like a firsty."

Sma smiled mischievously and said, "You'd be amazed what a healthy lifestyle can accomplish."

Professor McGonagall, who had been watching quietly and hiding her own amusement, jerked in surprise. Those were the exact words that Madam Pomfrey had spoken to the headmaster in their morning meeting. She looked suspiciously at Sma, wondering if this was merely a coincidence or something more. Sma, seeing her expression, winked rakishly before turning back to the store manager.

"Then you'll be wanting..." the man prompted.

"We'll take one of each," said Sma decisively.

"One set of first-year books? No problem, ma'am, would there be anything else?" the manager nodded.

"You misunderstand," said Sma. "We will take one copy of every book you have in stock."

"Every book?" repeated the manager dumbly.

Sma smiled cheekily at him and said, "I'm an avid reader."

Adopting a disbelieving expression the manager asked, "Are you certain you can afford this, ma'am? The cost would be--"

"Money means nothing to me," interrupted Sma, speaking literally.

The manager was too flabbergasted to respond right away. Once he managed to gather himself, he said, "All right, but it will take a while to get everything together for you to carry away. Of course, we'll shrink it for you, but..."

"It's a bit much to carry, even if you did shrink it down for us," Sma observed, turning an eye back to the many bookshelves. She was also reluctant to have anything shrunk due to the fact that they had no idea of how to later unshrink them. She nodded thoughtfully and then handed the man a business card. "Could you have them delivered to this address? We'd be glad to pay a little extra for your trouble."

This, to McGonagall's astonishment, set the trend for every store they visited. Harry would acquire exactly what was listed in his supply list and Sma would then buy one example of everything else the shop happened to have in stock. The professor eventually gave up trying to tally exactly how much money the pair spent in their shopping spree. It was a small fortune though; more than even the Malfoys could comfortably spend at any one time.

After having visited and sampling all that Diagon Alley had to offer the group retired to the Leaky Cauldron. It was now late in the afternoon and the Professor's first act upon entering the pub was to order a small gillywater. She did not often drink liquor, especially on a school day, but her time with Harry and Sma had been exhausting in more ways than one. The boy had a habit of asking questions about the strangest things at the most inopportune moments. The fact that Sma would frequently add her own opinion, usual one that was not very complimentary, left McGonagall feeling rather set upon. Taking a seat at one of the many empty tables, she sipped her drink and watched Harry and Sma say their goodbyes. Doing her best not to listen in, she did get the impression that it was a poignant moment.

"Try not to blow up any more sticks, please," pleaded Sma.

Harry rolled his eyes and answered dutifully, "Yes, Sma."

"And whatever you do, don't let them know about the small drones."

"Butch won't be a problem. Sylvester..."

"Well try to keep the stupid thing quiet. And make sure you never go anywhere without your knife-missile. The small-drones probably won't be able to follow you around to all your classes, so it'll be your first line of defence."

"Don't worry so much, Sma," Harry assured her. "It's a school."

"A school with trolls running around," muttered Sma.

Knowing better than to argue, Harry asked, "Anything else?"

Sma nodded, "Yes, keep an eye..." She paused to glance at McGonagall. "Keep an eye open for this 'stone' that was mentioned during their meeting this morning. Whatever it is, they seem rather concerned about its safety."

"They were probably talking about the Philosopher's Stone," said Harry, recalling his studies aboard the *No Posted Speed Limit*. "There's a few other 'stones' mentioned in the planet's mythology, but that's the most prominent. Supposedly it can transmute base metals into gold. Waste of time, really. It's probably being kept hidden somewhere on the third-floor corridor that Dumbledore warned us about."

"Yes, well, I imagine it would be considered quite important then," said Sma, noting that Harry's conclusion was identical to the one reached by the Minds.

"These people's obsession with gold is disturbing," Harry muttered.

Sma drew him into a hug and said, "Just keep an ear out for any mention of it. The Minds are curious."

Harry snorted and asked, "Why? The Culture already has the technology to transmute elements."

"Yes, but this is magic we're talking about," grinned Sma.

"Fine," relented Harry, "but you owe me for it."

"Oh? And what do you want?" asked Sma.

Harry declared his intentions by leaning up and kissing his guardian with all the passion he could muster. Professor McGonagall, who had been trying to give the pair an illusion of privacy to say their farewells, jerked back so violently that she caused her chair to toppled over. Scrabbling to her feet, McGonagall stared at her newest student in sheer disbelief. Skaffen-Amtiskaw, fully aware of the witch's reaction, made a note to discuss matters of propriety with young Harry. While such interaction would have scarcely raised an eyebrow in the Culture (Harry was *not* Sma's biological child, after all) it was fairly scandalous by Terrestrial terms. By some miracle of programming, Sylvester was intelligent enough to remain quiet and not put forth any commentary.

Sma, who had been expecting such a reaction (Harry's attraction to her was well remarked upon), simply went with the moment and returned the kiss. She did, however, note that her charge was a pretty good kisser for his age. He was by no means as experienced as the older lovers she preferred, but it was enough to make her wonder how good he would be at other activities. Something to consider for the future.

"Getting a little brash, are we?" she murmured, pulling away slowly.

"I know what I want, that's all," he quietly replied.

"And what makes you think you'll get what you want?"

Harry answered Sma's question with a hooded look. "Because I never stop until I do, Sma. You know that."

Sma grinned in acknowledgement to his point and playfully ruffled his already messy hair. "Well, don't expect me to reciprocate for a while yet. You're still a bit young for my tastes. Maybe after you graduate from Hogwarts."

"Bribery?" asked Harry.

"Incentive."

"I'll hold you to that."

"I'm a woman of my word."

That said, Sma pulled Harry in for another hug. She planted a soft and chaste kiss on his forehead. "Stay safe, darling, and don't hesitate to call me for anything that bothers you. And make sure you're always in contact with the *Fault*, or the drone. If anything happens; cut loose with the small-drones and your knife-missile. That should gain us enough time to come for you."

"I will," Harry promised.

Sma blinked back tears as she stepped away, reluctant to leave him. She had been separated from Harry before, called away by Special Circumstances, but those occasions had been few and far between. The Minds preferred to keep her close to her charge, even though he had a plethora of friends and pseudo-family to look after him. This time, however, it was Harry that would be leaving her to accomplish the tasks set before him. It was an unpleasant turnaround.

~ *Good luck, Harry*, projected Skaffen-Amtiskaw, rising into the air and dipping a corner in the boy's direction. Its aura field was a deep and sad purple with stripes of formal blue and proud sapphire. Luckily the Leaky Cauldron was mostly empty ahead of the dinnertime rush, so there was only Professor McGonagall and Tom to witness its actions. The publican stared at the floating block of colour for several seconds before shrugging off the entire episode as nothing more than some strange piece of magic.

"Thanks, Skaffy," said Harry quietly, acknowledging the drone's farewell.

Sma walked to where her companion was hovering and took hold of the faux handle its disguise field was projecting. Skaffen-Amtiskaw promptly resumed its faux black leather appearance and lowered itself to the appropriate height to make it appear that Sma was carrying it.

"Goodbye Harry."

"Goodbye Dizzy."

Giving a somewhat tremulous, but mostly confident smile, Sma exited the pub. Harry looked after her, even after the door had swung shut, until Professor McGonagall approached and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. Shaking himself out of his thoughts of how he seemed to be making a lot of goodbyes recently, he released a small dose of *Calm* into his system and he looked up to her. He considered her slightly paler than normal face and the sharp line of her lips. Clearly, the witch was feeling concerned. He had a feel he knew why.

"Do you - does she - does that happen often?" McGonagall finally managed to ask.

"That's the first time I've ever kissed her like that," said Harry.

"Has she ever kissed you like that?"

"No, of course not."

McGonagall sighed softly in relief, though she still felt that the matter was wholly inappropriate. Hoping to understand the reasoning behind what she had seen, she asked, "Then why did you do that? She's your mother, after all."

Harry looked at her with some annoyance. "She *is* my mother," he agreed, "but she is *not* actually related to me."

"Perhaps, but she is old enough to be your mother. Such familiarity is hardly proper."

Harry briefly considered telling her that Sma was many times older than Lily Potter had been at the time of her death, but decided against it. Their parting kiss had already stirred up too much attention. No need to add any more fuel to the fire. Hoping to let the matter drop, he tried to turn the conversation to their imminent departure.

"Will we be riding in the... uh... the..." Harry trailed off, unsure of how to describe the official Hogwarts fliwer.

"We will be Apparating to Hogsmeade; there will be a carriage waiting to take us to the castle," said McGonagall, somewhat relieved at the change of topic.

"Hogsmeade, that's the village in the valley, right?" checked Harry.

"Yes," confirmed McGonagall.

"I've only ever, er, Apparated either line-of-sight or to places I've already been," Harry confessed.

McGonagall turned to him with a stern expression on her face and stated, "You will *not* be Apparating yourself, Mr. Potter. Regardless of whatever the law may be in Magical South Africa, here in England children are not allowed to take such blatant risks." She secured her hat and extended a hand, which Harry took hold of. "I shall Apparate you alongside myself to our destination."

With a crack of displaced air, Harry and McGonagall disappeared.

“May I have your attention please?”

Dinner in the Great Hall was in full swing and the entire population of Hogwarts was in attendance. At the sound of the headmaster’s announcement, the students hushed and turned to face the staff table. Dumbledore stood patiently and waited for them (and some of the staff as well) to finish settling. Once things were quiet, he began to speak.

“As you are all no doubt aware,” he said, “last night one of our students, Hermione Granger,” he indicated to the girl sitting at the Gryffindor table, “found herself faced with certain death at the hands of a rogue mountain troll.”

All eyes focused on Hermione, causing the bushy-haired girl to blush furiously and duck her head in embarrassment. She did, however, take some small pleasure in the chagrined expression on Ron Weasley’s face. Professor McGonagall had, after returning to Gryffindor Tower the previous evening, given the boy a proper dressing down for the words he had used after Charms class; the words that had sent her fleeing to the girls’ bathroom.

Attention returned to Dumbledore as he continued, “You are also, no doubt, aware that Miss Granger was rescued by the fortuitous arrival of a young wizard who, at great personal risk, saved her from harm and defeated the troll. I am speaking of none other than Harry Potter.”

A wave of hushed voices raced through the students at this definite confirmation of the rumours that had been flying about all day. The whisperings had an undertone of excitement, mixed with both awe and wonder. No doubt a great many new tall tales would be circulating before the night was out.

“Yes, yes,” Dumbledore nodded. “The Boy-Who-Lived-And-Vanished has at last come home.”

Shouts, cheers, whistles and applause greeted this pronouncement, though restricted primarily to the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables. Ravenclaw was more reserved, but still pleased to hear the news. Slytherin, however, were not enthused at all and only gave enough reaction to meet the demands of common courtesy.

With his usual impeccable timing, Dumbledore gestured to the doors and proclaimed, “And I present to you now; the Boy-Who-Returned!”

Silently, as the hinges were charmed against creaking, the doors to the Great Hall swung open. Everyone, even the Slytherins, craned their necks to get a better look at what was being revealed. Once again whispers erupted at the sight of the waiting Professor McGonagall and Harry Potter. As the pair strode into the Hall, allowing the students a proper look, the hushed conversations grew in intensity.

Having reclaimed his seat, Dumbledore could understand the various reactions to the sight of the wizarding world’s long-lost hero. Harry Potter was, most certainly, not what anyone would have expected. He was exceptionally tall for an eleven-year-old and could, at first glance, easily pass for a third-year student. He did not carry himself with the arrogance of some celebrities, nor was he unnerved by the attention focused upon him. Instead, he strode down centre aisle with a calm acceptance, as if he were well used to being in the proverbial spotlight.

Not for the first time since meeting the boy, the headmaster found himself wondering if this was a prudent course of action. Had Harry been raised by the Dursleys, there would have been no surprises; Dumbledore would have known exactly what to expect from the boy. It was much the same with most of the students, such as Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy. He knew their parents and therefore knew how the children had been raised.

Harry, however, had been raised by a completely unknown factor; Diziet Sma and her unnamed (and only obliquely mentioned) friends. As such, Harry Potter was a mystery. And Dumbledore hated mysteries. Well, unless of course he was the one keeping them.

Reaching the raised dais for the staff table, Professor McGonagall brought Harry to a halt in front of the Sorting Hat and its stool. “We’ll begin your Sorting in a moment, Mr. Potter,” she said softly. “Wait here, please.”

Dumbledore waited several moments, silently observing the young wizard standing before him. There was a great deal of hushed whispering going on amongst the students. Harry ignored it all, including Dumbledore’s appraisal, and stood patiently in place.

“Welcome to Hogwarts, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore finally greeted.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” replied Harry.

“You’re a bit late, perhaps, but that’s preferable to you not attending at all.” Harry accepted this statement without reaction. Dumbledore cleared his throat and, for the first time since becoming headmaster, began to explain the school’s house system. “As you may know, there are four houses at Hogwarts, representing each of the four founders. Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin,” he pointed out each house as he named them. “Each student is Sorted into the house that best matches their personality. Gryffindor house typifies those of excessive bravery; Hufflepuff is home to those with a solid work ethic; Ravenclaw is a gathering of those that value intellectual pursuits; and Slytherin attracts those ruled by their ambitions.”

Harry nodded in understanding and asked, “How do you determine which students possess which traits?”

After a nod from Dumbledore, McGonagall took over the explanation. Clearing her throat, she indicated the Sorting Hat; resting placidly on the stool between them. “This is the Sorting Hat,” she explained. “Place it upon your head and it will find the proper place for you.

“You have to be joking,” said Harry, staring flatly at her.

“I assure you, Mr. Potter, I am not,” McGonagall replied, having expected such a reaction.

“You honestly believe that some dirty old rag can determine which house would be the best match for my personality?”

“My, such scepticism,” the Sorting Hat drawled, its brim parting in mimicry of lips as it spoke.

“A talking hat,” said Harry, bewildered. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why am I even surprised by this? After the talking paintings, a talking hat is almost normal.”

“This is Hogwarts School, boy,” the Hat proclaimed with authority. “There is no such thing as ‘normal’.”

Harry looked blankly at the Hat and then to the waiting McGonagall. He shifted his focus from one to the other several times before shrugging. “Fine. Why not? Let’s throw logic and common sense out the window. Goodness knows I’ve never used them.”

Ignoring the young wizard’s sarcastic tone, McGonagall motioned for him to take his place on the stool beside her.

“Sma is not going to believe this,” grumbled Harry, taking his seat on the stool.

Professor McGonagall settled the Hat down on his head and the last thing Harry saw, before the Hat dropped over his eyes, was the expectant faces of his future fellow students. They all seemed much more excited about the whole endeavour than he was. With his sight hindered by the black inside of the Hat, Harry closed his eyes and waited patiently. He hoped this wouldn’t take too long.

“Oh my,” said a small voice, causing Harry to start with surprise. *“Oh my,”* it repeated. *“This is... different. Very different. And very difficult.”*

“Shit!” exclaimed Harry aloud, causing the rest of the Great Hall to titter in amusement.

“No need to be alarmed, young Potter,” said the voice. *“It is only me; the hat on your head.”*

“Insane, the lot of you,” muttered Harry.

“Strange that you should think so, many of those here would say it was you that is insane. And no need to speak out loud; I can hear your thoughts quite clearly. It’s actually a pleasant change, having to Sort someone with such an organised mind. But is that you, I wonder, or this... machine woven into your brain that is producing such order?”

“What?” asked Harry dumbly as the Hat’s words sank in.

“So where shall I put you?” the Hat wondered. *“You could be great, you know, it’s all here in your head—”*

Harry’s mind finally managed to accept what was happening to him. Despite that the Hat had laid everything out in plain, he had initially refused to believe that it was actually daring to read his mind. Practically the only form of private property the Culture recognised was thought and memory. Anything and everything else was, theoretically, available to anybody at any time. Reading someone else’s mind, without their express permission, was considered almost as heinous a crime as murder and rape. Once the realization was completely formed that the Sorting Hat was doing just that, a wave of unadulterated rage exploded within him.

“Meat Fucker!” snarled Harry, pulling the Hat off his head and furiously throwing it aside. Leaping to his feet he began to swear up a storm, unleashing a string of obscenities that made full use of every single language he knew. He made particular use of German, Russian and 3rd Era Galactic Common, whose harsher tones lent themselves to the fury that coursed through him.

“Harry Potter!”

Harry’s tirade came to an abrupt halt as Dumbledore’s voice rang out. The boy turned to stare at the headmaster with wide eyes. The sheer aura of command radiating from the old wizard was almost palpable; so much so that he felt his words stick in his throat.

Dumbledore stared back at him; his face set in a stern frown, and said, “I will thank you to keep a polite tone of voice when in the company of others.”

Swallowing round the constriction in his throat, Harry hung his head and contritely apologised, “Sorry.”

“Now, what seems to be the problem, Mr. Potter?”

Harry looked up and answered, “The Hat read my mind. Without permission, it read my mind.”

The Hat, having been scooped up from where it had been hurled, spoke from McGonagall’s grasp, “And how else do you expect me to Sort you then, hmm? This is not some silly little game, Potter; this is what will determine your entire future here!”

There was an explosive crack as the stool splintered into kindling. For the first time in a decade, Harry Potter had unleashed a burst of accidental magic. He glared hatefully at the Hat and snarled, “You violated my mind! You never even bothered to ask – you just jumped in there and started rummaging about! I don’t care what you backward fools might say, but where I come from that’s called rape!”

A ringing silence descended over the Great Hall on the heels of Harry’s words.

“How dare you?”

The Sorting Hat spoke barely above a whisper, but everyone present heard it clearly. “How dare you?” it repeated, its voice gaining in volume with each word. “How dare you say such a thing? I have been here for a thousand years and have Sorted every single student to ever attend this school.

Every. Single. Student."

"Sort my limp dick," retorted Harry. "You raped their minds just as you raped mine!"

"NO!!"

"Mr. Potter--" began Dumbledore, rising to his feet.

"Shut up, Dumbledore!" bellowed the Hat, interrupting the headmaster. It shifting in place and seemed to glare across at the old man. "This is between me and the boy. Your interference is not needed and certainly not desired. So sit down and shut up."

Blinking in consternation at being addressed in such a fashion, by a hat of all things, Dumbledore sank back into his seat.

With a huff the Hat returned its attention back to Harry. "You would dare accuse me of such a -- a vile action."

"Did you ask for my permission first?" asked Harry.

"I did not need to," retorted the Hat. "Such permission was assumed when you allowed me to be put on your head."

"So you excuse your crimes by the assumption that your victims knew what you were doing?"

"Victims!"

"Do you enjoy it?" asked Harry. "You do, don't you? Seeing people's deepest secrets, their most private thoughts? What, does it make you feel better than them? Stronger, perhaps? Smarter? Or do you get some perverse pleasure in knowing that you can violate them so utterly without their knowledge? That they're literally lining up for you to have a go at them?"

"ENOUGH!" roared the Hat, quivering in a fury that matched Harry's earlier anger.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?" smirked Harry. "Or is it because I've revealed your atrocity to the other children?"

"I love the children, more than you could comprehend! My only reason for existing is the children! To Sort them into the correct house, to guide them along the best path for them to succeed! Nothing is more important to me!"

"And yet you routinely abuse their most intimate privacy."

"Their thoughts and secrets are as safe as can be," argued the Hat passionately. "I guard them with all that I am. The very magic that created me would see that I was undone, completely destroyed, before I betrayed a single one of them!"

"Forgive me if I remain sceptical as to the trustworthiness of a piece of cloth," retorted Harry.

"Do not presume to laud your own moral superiority over me, Potter," the Hat warned. "Remember, I saw what was in your head. Not much of it, not all of it, not before you threw me off, but I saw enough."

"I've never done anything like what you have," retaliated Harry.

"I do not speak of you, boy. I speak of the Culture; the people that raised you; the Minds that direct you."

Harry was frozen in place, glaring at the Sorting Hat, not with anger, but with caution. "You don't know what you're talking about," he said frostily. "You and this castle have stood for a thousand years, yes, but our history goes back many times further. And unlike you lot; we've learned from our mistakes."

The Hat seemed to adopt a sly expression and asked, in passable Marain, "Like the Chelgrian Caste War?"

The mention of Culture's most recent (not to mention devastating) Contact blunder, caused Harry to rock back a step. His glare transformed into a look of pale disquiet. "You know about that?" he asked, in the same language. Even as he wondered how the Hat knew Marain, another part of him was glad that nobody else would be able to understand them.

"Aye," confirmed the Hat. "You were thinking of a girl, Chomba, and the music you both listened to. A symphony composed by a Chelgrian exile to commemorate something even more terrible. Portisia and Junce."

"The Iridans--"

"Had attempted to sue for peace several times before that final battle," the Hat interrupted. "Fifty years of warfare, too horrible to speak of, yet your people refused to accept anything less than their total surrender."

"Perhaps," Harry agreed, warily, "but we are not so childish as to forswear our responsibility in those atrocities. Or for what happened on Chel. We intervened when we saw what was happening. We admitted our involvement. Can you and your people say the same?"

"Accepting blame does not come easily to humans," replied the Hat.

"I suppose. But tell me this; Chel was a mistake, as were the Twin Novae. How many atrocities in your history were the same? The Spanish Inquisition? The Rape of Nanking? The Nazi Holocaust? The Sharpeville Massacre? Were those acts of goodwill gone wrong?"

And you don't have anything similar in your own past?"

"Of course we do," Harry readily admitted. "But our past is very far removed from your present."

"Hmph, perhaps," admitted the Hat.

"So..." mused Harry after several moments of silence between the pair. "What now?"

The Hat regarded Harry for a long minute, staring at him with such focused concentration that the boy almost wondered how its intelligence would compare against that of a Mind. He also worried, if only a little, over the possibility that the cursed thing was trying to read his thoughts from a distance. Only the fact that the Hat needed to be on his head for that reassured him.

"Well, you certainly have a sharp mind," the Hat finally concluded, reverting back to English. "The belligerence of a Gryffindor. The stubbornness of a Hufflepuff. The ruthlessness of a Slytherin. But still... a sharp mind." It twisted to face the headmaster, who (along with everyone else) had been watching and listening intently. "Dumbledore," it directed, "put the brat in RAVENCLAW!"

"I beg your pardon?" asked Dumbledore, regarding the Hat incredulously.

"You heard me, you old coot," the Hat grumbled. "I've seen and heard enough. Put me on his head again or not, it makes no difference. It is my decision that Harry Potter be Sorted into Rowena's house. Now send me back to my shelf - I need a long rest after this. Don't bother me again until next year's Sorting."

Blinking rapidly, the headmaster looked from the Hat to Harry and back several times. Finally he nodded slowly and motioned for Harry to move. "Very well," he said. "Mr. Potter, your house awaits you."

Harry nodded, just as slowly and warily, and walked over to the appropriate table. Not unexpectedly, he was greeted by silence. The events of the past few minutes were a lot to take in and his new housemates were in no condition to welcome him with any enthusiasm.

The remainder of dinner that night was a very quiet affair.

-oOo-

[New M16-level Core Group formed. @n4.58.232.1888

Name: Interesting Times Gang (Act VI).]

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

And so it begins.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

Why do you always try to sound like an all-wise, all-knowing mystical sage?

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

I'm a Culture Mind. Of course I'm all-wise and all-knowing.

~

x *Anticipation Of A New Lover's Arrival, The* (GSV, Plate Class):

How droll.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

And the mystical sage?

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Well, it seems appropriate, considering.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

Agreed.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Let us please dispense with the witty banter. What of our information gathering efforts?

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Sma's shopping expedition is already bearing fruit. Most of the supplies and equipment she purchased have already been delivered to the London penthouse we're operating from.

~

x *Stood Far Back When The Gravitas Was Handed Out* (GSV, Plate Class):

The *It's Not My Fault* is in the process of studying them.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

And what of the books? Those will help us the most, if only in terms of constructing an accurate history for these "magic" users.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

The books have been delivered to Sma and Displaced to the *Fault* for transcription, despite the difficulties encountered.

~

x *Fate Amenable To Change* (GCU, Escarpment Class):

What difficulties could there possibly be in the scanning of books?

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

Apparently, to facilitate their transport, the bookstore saw fit to shrink the books to a more manageable size.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

They *shrank* the books?

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Your attempt a humour is not amusing.

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

I'm not joking. They shrank the books. Significantly. Sma was able to hold an entire encyclopaedia, thirty-six volumes, in the palm of her hand.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Impossible!

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Magic.

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

So it would seem. How long will it be before the *It's Not My Fault* is able to transmit the completed scans to us?

~

x *Time And Again* (MSV Desert Class):

It has to scan the books using effector molecular imaging, as many of the shrunken pages are rather delicate – even under field manipulation. Image recognition scanning is thus not an option. At its current rate of progress it will have completed the task in another twenty-two seconds.

~

x *End In Tears* (Rock, First Era):

Slow, but acceptable.

~

x *Serious Callers Only* (LSV, Tundra Class):

Agreed.

~

x *What Are The Civilian Applications?* (GSV, Continent Class, Sub-Class Prompt, Limited):

Agreed.

~

x *Staff* (Orbital Hub, Seseris system, [solo]):

Agreed.

~

x *Different Tan* (GCU, Mountain Class):

I think we'll be having some interesting reading in the near future.

~

x *Limivorous* (GSV, Ocean Class):

Undoubtedly.

TBC...