

Incredible

by

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Table of Contents

Incredible.....1

 Lost.....3

 Investigation.....30

 Preparation.....54

Lost

July 30, 1997

Nye County, Nevada, USA

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Project Boom Box Ground Zero

4:47 pm

Robert Bruce Banner, PhD stood to the side watching the crane slowly lower his creation into its cradle. It was a work of beauty, a collection of precision systems engineered to produce more energy in a single release than anything man had yet managed.

"That beast is too damned big for any platform we've got in service these days." The man to Banner's left said. Air Force Lieutenant General Thaddeus E. "Thunderbolt" Ross chewed on his cigar.

"It's a prototype General. You couldn't fit the Fatman bomb on any of your modern platforms either." *Idiot* he added in the depths of his mind. "Besides the actual weapon is only about two feet by six feet. The rest of that package is the command, control and telemetry interfaces." Banner hated the man for his shortsighted simplistic thinking, but the General was the key to the funding that Banner needed for his project. The military had the money, so as a stepping stone to his Gamma Power Plant, Banner let himself be

talked into building this Gamma Bomb.

The casing slide into its mounts on the cradle like a hand into a glove. Technicians rushed about securing the mounts, connecting telemetry cables and taking readings using the various instruments arranged about the bomb. Banner's assistant Emil Blonsky, PhD approached carrying a Stark Industries Datapad.

"Everything is working perfectly Bruce, every single reading is optimal."

Banner took the offered Datapad and verified the readings. "Thank you Emil. Everything looks good General, we just need your go ahead now."

Ross's gaze never left the weapon. A lot rode on this high tech fire cracker. It had been so much easier when he was a pilot. He knew his career was coming to a close, and while every command he had ever had was marked with achievement, he lacked the political skills to pick up that fourth star he wanted so badly before he left the service. That fourth star depended on this 'experiment' turning out successfully. "Go."

Banner manipulated a few controls on the Datapad. In the upper left hand a digital display set to twenty four hours, zero minutes, and zero seconds. Project Boom Box's lead scientist picked up his radio. "All sections, this is Banner. We have go authorization. Starting twenty four hour count down on my mark." He touched the controls of the Datapad. "Mark"

The synchronized clocks at all control stations of Project Boom Box began their countdown.

---===oooOOOooo===---

July 30, 1997

Los Angeles California, USA

Los Angeles International Airport

Crowne Plaza Hotel

8:31 pm

Harry Potter carried the luggage into the room through the door that Hermione Granger was holding open. A Nonstop flight London to LAX was a hellish thing to be subjected to he had decided around the fifth hour in the air. The fact that he still had over six hours of flight left at that point hadn't done much for his state of mind. Still, they were in Los Angeles now. Tomorrow they would carry on to their destination, but for now...

It was then he saw the room. He stopped stock still. It was a large room, with a desk, a large chest of drawers, a television and *TWO BEDS*.

"This isn't right."

"What isn't Harry?" Hermione asked in an exhausted manner. Harry hadn't gotten any sleep on the plane because it turned out that Mr. 'Born to fly' was a white knuckle flier prone to near panic attacks. Hermione hadn't gotten any sleep on the plane because Harry wouldn't leave her alone so that she could.

"This is one room. I expected... I don't know, bedrooms."

"Harry." She said tiredly. "Look, I know that other than the Leaky Cauldron this is the first hotel you've ever stayed in. This is how a room is set up. The Hotel is full, they don't have any other rooms. I'm going to take a hot bath then crawl into that bed there and sleep." She grinned. "Your virtue is safe with me. Do you want first shot at the bath?"

"Hermione, this isn't right. People will think horrible things about you if we share a room. I'll go sleep in the rental car."

"Harry!" The bushy haired woman stood with her fists on her hips. "It is almost the twenty first century you prat. I don't give a damn about what anyone thinks of who I chose to spend the night with outside of my parents, who know we're together and trust me to make my own decisions. You aren't spending the night in the car. You aren't going to panic. You're going to get ready to sleep and you're going to sleep in that bed, while I'm in this bed. I'm tired and you are annoying me. Do you want first shot at the bath?"

Harry recognized the look on her face to be the one that indicated that disagreeing with her was potentially painful. He grabbed the smaller of his bags and entered the bath, locking the door while feeling a bit silly in doing so... It wasn't like Hermione was going to break in... was it?

He discovered that the bath included a shower with the most interesting shower head that pulsed and moved in a tight circle with wonderfully hot water. Following a long (too long?) shower, he dried himself and found his sleeping attire.

Had he known he would be sharing a room with Hermione he probably would have packed more than boxer shorts and a tank top for sleeping in, but he hadn't worn pajamas for years and had no other choices. While he dressed his thoughts drifted to Hermione sleeping so closely to him and his body began to react. He started at the traitorous portion of his anatomy for a second, then closed his eyes and thought about how badly he wanted to kill Draco Malfoy for what he had done to Ginny until the reaction went away.

He quickly cleaned up behind himself before exiting the bath. He found Hermione sitting on the foot of the bed she had chosen for herself flipping through the channels on the television.

"All done?" she asked brightly.

Harry nodded, not daring to make eye contact and chance another physical indication of what being so close to her did to him. He put his bag back with the rest of their luggage and then pulled back the bedding to lie down.

Hermione gathered her things and entered the bath. The place was spotless. Hermione shook her head. Pure Harry. He always cleaned up after himself. She wondered what kind of hell his family had put him through to have Harry so indoctrinated.

Or was he just trying to keep things easy for her? With Harry, it was so hard to tell.

Her shower was long and very hot. There was something about long trips by plane. She knew she needed to sleep to reset her body clock, and Harry had unwittingly helped with that by keeping her awake during the flight. She towed herself dry, and pulled on a pair of her father's boxers she had liberated for sleepwear two years before. Then she dug her favorite night shirt out of her bag. It was a Quidditch jersey she had bought from a vendor at the World Cup on a dare from Ginny. A Gryffindor jersey with "POTTER" emblazoned between the shoulder blades. The shirt was getting a bit threadbare, and Hermione had plans to replace it if they returned to Hogwarts by stealing one of Harry's actual playing jerseys. She smiled at that thought... Hermione Granger, master thief! Owners of comfortable sleepwear beware!

Hermione exited the bath to find Harry sound asleep on his bed, still wearing his glasses. Hermione left the light in the bath on and closed the door to leave a crack open as a minor source of light in the unfamiliar room, and she made

sure the room was locked before turned off all the other lights in the room proper. By the glow of the television she carefully removed Harry's glasses and set them on the side table. Hermione stood, looking at her friend of more than six years, and leaned down to lightly kiss him on his forehead before moving to her own bed and slipping between the sheets. Turning off the television with the remote, it was only a moment before she was sleeping herself.

-----oooOOOooo-----

July 30, 1997

Mesquite, Nevada, USA

10:06 am

Rick Jones was a frustrated young man. Six weeks before he had set out from his home in Indiana intending to go to Los Angeles to be discovered and make his fortune. Unfortunately, he had run out of money on his way and had been stuck in this Podunk town for three weeks trying to earn enough to keep going.

He was washing dishes at a greasy spoon diner when the radio began a news report. There was an entertainment news segment on some singer or other who was discovered when she protested a logging operation. Figures, some stupid girl ties herself to a tree, and ends up with the chance he would kill for.

That was when the idea occurred to him. The previous day Rick had heard

some of the locals grouching about the government shipping a lot of men and equipment to something called the NNTS to the North West. That might be a place to make his own splash. Hop the fence, find a likely place, and strum his guitar until the press shows up... You can't buy that kind of publicity.

Rick smiled. Sometimes he amazed even himself.

-----oooOOOooo-----

July 31, 1997

Nye County, Nevada, USA

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Project Boom Box Command Center

7:28 am

Emil Blonsky sat at the diagnostic panel running the tests scheduled for this hour. It had been a long night, and of course Banner wasn't in yet. Probably chased Ross's daughter around the bungalow they shared until she caught him. It had taken Blonsky only a year to learn to hate Banner. The man was brilliant, but his work habits were slovenly. Blonsky resented the fact that Banner never took the night shifts for his tests, always assigning Emil to take them. He resented that fact that Blonsky's own work had been instrumental to bring this weapon to fruition, but only Banner's name was associated with it. Stark and Richards and Pym came to speak with Banner, but never with Blonsky.

Gamma source: Stable. System coolant: Optimal. Control interface: Working perfectly.

Blonsky made the notations on the countdown checklist. Everything was going perfectly, following the project timelines to the letter. This made the cynic inside Emil Blonsky nervous. When things were going well, that only meant the great god Murphy was lulling you into a false sense of security. Still... Why borrow trouble?

----===oooOOOooo===----

July 31, 1997

Nye County, Nevada, USA

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Command Building

8:00 am

Major Glenn Talbot was waiting at his desk when Tunderbolt Ross entered the office at exactly 8 am. His year and two months as Ross' aide had taught him that the Lieutenant General was habitually punctual, and expected his staff to be ready to hit the ground running each and every day.

"Where are we Talbot?" The old man barked out as he passed through the outer office toward his own. Talbot rose from his desk to follow his CO.

"You have a conference call in nine minutes with Logistics Command about your upcoming budget. You surprised them by not asking for an increase and they want to verify."

"Of course they do, the time wasting bastards. That will be two hours I'll never get back. What else?" Ross occupied himself by pouring a cup of coffee from the urn delivered to the office by one of the enlisted staff when he had been alerted that the old man's had entered the base by the gate sentries.

"Project Boom Box is exactly on schedule. They are coming to a programmed hold at 8:30, if everything continues as per the program, they will resume the count down to the detonation at 9:40 meaning G-hour will be in approximately," he paused and glanced at his watch. "Eight hours fifty six minutes."

Ross nodded and removed his uniform blouse. "Good. Get logistics on the horn then."

----==oooOOOooo==----

July 31, 1997

Nye County, Nevada, USA

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Project Boom Box Command Center

9:02 am

Emil Blonsky looked up as the almighty Bruce Banner entered the Command Center. The man made a circuit of the displays and control consoles before settling down into the chair at his personal console.

"How did the programmed hold go?"

Blonsky turned from his instrumentation to look at his 'boss'. "Everything is optimal. When you light the fuse on this bad boy they're going to feel the boom in 'Vegas.'"

Banner nodded and took a sip of the Earl Grey tea that he always drank. Not coffee, oh no. Nothing so plebian for the great Banner. The phony even wore a white lab coat so that everyone knew he was a scientist, even though he was in no danger of anything being spilled on his clothing. Blonsky wondered if Banner realized that he was mocking his superior with his outfit. Blonsky was clad in boots, jeans and a black tee shirt emblazoned with a stereo typical

bald mad scientist holding a beaker to the light and the legend '**Back Off - I'm doing SCIENCE!**'

"We make history today Emil." Banner said confidently. "People will talk about this day they way they talk about the moon landing."

Oh they'll talk about it. Blonsky thought sullenly. But the name everyone will know will be Banner.

----===oooOOOooo===----

July 31, 1997

Los Vegas, Nevada, USA

The Steakhouse

1:17 pm

"I hope you don't mind the delay Harry. I just needed to get out of that car for awhile."

Harry looked up from the menu in his hands. "Not at all, I just wish I could drive so that it wouldn't all fall to you. Can you believe the size of these servings?"

"I know." She dimpled. "We had a family vacation in the Florida when I was ten; Daddy still raves about the great steaks and how cheap they were."

"Went to Disney world did you?"

"And to the Kennedy Space Center. We got to see a night launch of the Shuttle."

"Fan girl." He teased. "Still I couldn't eat one of these steaks for lunch, not without sleeping all afternoon anyway."

"There are burgers and sandwiches on the back." Hermione pointed out.

"Ah, saved me again." Harry turned to the appropriate page.

"I wonder what the wait staff would do if I told them this was your birthday?" Hermione mused with an evil smirk.

"Don't you dare." Harry said horrified that she would even joke about such a thing.

Their waiter took their orders, and then left them alone. Harry looked across the table at Hermione who was people watching. A part of him wished that Ron had come along, a larger part was very glad that his best male friend was on the other side of the world.

"Are we expected at any specific time?"

"No." She said shaking her head. "Mr. Grayson said that we would be welcome when ever we could get out to meet him." She looked a bit embarrassed. "Meet you actually. He wasn't all that interested in speaking with me until I mentioned your name."

Harry shrugged. "If it opens the occasional door, use my name all you want. Though I must admit to being surprised that he had ever heard of me."

Hermione shook her head. "You've got to get it through your head that you are a big deal Harry. Mr. Grayson is a Shaman of the Southern Paiutes people. From some of the records I found in the Restricted section it seems that the Paiutes had a method for destroying Aztec 'soul jars'. If the Aztec soul jar was anything like the Egyptian soul jar which was the basis for the Horcrux, the possibility exists that we will have a safer way of dealing with Horcruxes than your 'stab it with a basilisk fang' technique."

"Or Dumbledore's 'let's put the cursed ring on' technique. Mine was more dangerous, but at least it wasn't stupid."

"Yes, well, Ron has custody of the locket that Regulus stole and he knows to keep it away from people."

"Do you know where he put it? He wouldn't tell me."

"He surprised me. It's in a dragon skin pouch, connected to the back side of the minute hand of the south face of Big Ben. He said that it would keep it away from people in a place where the Death Eaters would never look."

Harry nodded in appreciation to his friend's inventiveness. "But why wouldn't he tell me?"

Hermione smirked. "Ron was afraid that you'd go all heroey and self sacrificey and try to destroy the stupid thing on your own."

Harry huffed. "I wouldn't..." He looked up to see Hermione looking at him with a single raised eyebrow. "ok. I would."

"That's alright Harry." She reached across the table to take his hand. "I trust

you. I trust you because you know I'd hurt you if you ever tried to run off without me."

The waitress arrived with their lunches before Harry could reply, and thusly saved him from having Hermione prove she meant what she said.

----==oooOOOooo==----

July 31, 1997

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Remote Gate Seven

3:49 pm

Rick arrived at the unmanned unmarked gate. Parking he got out of his car to examine the gate for entrance. The Gate was chained shut. Perfect.

Running back to his trunk he removed a large bolt cutter and made short work of the chain. Shoving the gate open, Jones returned to his car, tossing the bolt cutter into the back seat and drove onto the base down the dirt road.

----==oooOOOooo==----

July 31, 1997

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Remote Gate Seven

4:01 pm

"Well, there's no doubt about it." Harry said resisting the temptation to shred the map in his hands to several hundred pieces."

"What?" Hermione asked.

"We're lost. No freaking idea where we are or even what road we're on."

"You were supposed to keep track of those things."

"Well excuse me. I missed the day in class when they taught us to navigate using American Rental Car maps. I haven't even seen anyone on this road for half an hour."

"There's a gate." Hermione pointed. Maybe a house or business at the end of the dirt road."

Harry shrugged. "Works for me."

Hermione turned the car off the main road, through the gate and started down the dirt road.

-----oooOOOooo-----

July 31, 1997

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Bunker 9

4:31 pm

The small building loomed to his left, so Rick pulled his ancient Dodge Dart to a stop. In the distance he could see some other buildings and some kind of tower thing. This seemed to be as good a place as any to make his splash. Pulling his guitar from the front passenger seat, Rick made his way to the shade of the dusty little building.

Suddenly adust plume bloomed from the buildings in the distance. Excellent, he'd been noticed. Time to start playing so that his audience would be entertained.

He grinned to himself as he began to tune his guitar. He loved it when a plan came together.

----==oooOOOooo==----

July 31, 1997

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Project Boom Box Command Center

4:32 pm

Twenty four minutes to G-Hour

Banner was a bundle of nerves. The closer to G-Hour they got the less he could sit still. He moved to the observation slits to look out at his baby in the distance one last time when a flash of light attracted his attention. Picking up the military issue binoculars he could just make out a person and a civilian vehicle through the heat distortion coming off the sun baked ground.

"Emil!" Banner barked. "Stop the countdown. There's someone on the

grounds."

"One of the soldiers doing a last check?" Blonsky suggested.

"Not unless the soldiers have taken to wearing Greenbay Packers football jerseys and making their rounds in a Dodge Dart." The head scientist of Project Boom Box made his way to the door. "Stop the countdown, I'll get that idiot out of the area."

Banner exited the Command Center and climbed into the Humvee assigned for his use tossing his Datapad onto the passenger seat. Starting the vehicle he drove toward Bunker 9 with all the speed he could manage.

Emil Blonsky's hand hovered over the hold button. One motion and all the countdown functions were stopped... he glanced at the countdown timer. Twenty Two minutes to detonation. It would be terrible if anyone were out there when the Gamma Bomb went off... with Banner gone, Blonsky would be the lead scientist. Emil Blonsky would be the name in the journals and the history books. The countdown clock ticked over to twenty one minutes. No more Banner. No more of Banner's crap jobs. No more...

-----oooOOOooo-----

July 31, 1997

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

Bunker 9

4:54 pm

Two minutes to G-Hour

The humvee screeched to a halt a few scant yards from where Rick Jones was strumming his guitar.

"Dude!" Rick looked up at the wild eyed man who climbed out of the huge truck think. "You should be careful, you almost ran me over."

"You IDIOT!" Banner screamed at him. "You're on a nuclear test site. A test was supposed to go off in less than five minutes. The only reason you aren't radioactive vapor is I spotted you completely by accident. Get in this truck now!"

Jones hesitated for a moment. He hadn't expected to find himself on a bomb range; he stood and rushed toward the huge vehicle.

Banner reached over to move his Datapad from the seat, when he spotted the countdown timer still counting down. One minute thirty eight seconds. His eyes widened, a quick glance showed that the wireless connection was still

active. The only way the countdown timer could still be running is if the countdown hadn't been stopped. In a panic he searched for his radio... he hadn't brought it.

"Oh god. The countdown is still running!" Banner leaped from the humvee and ran to the door of the bunker only to find it locked. One minute nineteen seconds. Behind the bunker? No. What was that? Another car? What the hell was going on?

The newcomers pulled to a stop next to his humvee. A young man stepped out of the car. "Excuse me." He said. Banner's panicked mind barely registered that the boy had an English Accent. "We've gotten a bit lost, could you point us toward the Moapa Paiutes Reservation?"

One minute seven seconds.

"We're in the middle of a nuclear test site. There is a experimental device going off in two minutes!"

A young woman got out of the car. "You're serious?"

One minute two seconds. He couldn't get them into the bunker, being in the cars would be worse than useless. Banners mind raced.

"What do we do?" The girl asked.

Banner looked around. "There's a slit trench that way. If we can get to it..."

One minute.

The four of them began to run. The two English teens were wearing sneakers Banner noted and took an early lead in the race for their lives. The idiot with the guitar was wearing boots, which didn't help him run at all. Bruce himself was wearing the Italian loafers that were completely unsuited to running in the desert. The scientist fell at that very thought. The guitar player stopped and helped him up. Banner saw the time on his watch.

Twenty one seconds.

---===oooOOOooo===---

Harry and Hermione reached the trench first, and Harry roughly pushed her into it. Hermione looked up at him, her eyes pleading for him to join her. He turned to see that the other two were hobbling toward him. /Secrecy be damned/. He thought pulling his wand.

"Accio men."

nine seconds

-----oooOOOooo-----

Banner found himself lifted bodily into the air with the guitar player at his side, and they flew to the English boy who stopped them with a grunt. The analytical part of Banner's mind wanted to know what the holy hell had just happened. The practical part decided that it could wait until after they survived the bomb.

Two seconds

-----oooOOOooo-----

Harry pushed the pair into the trench, ignoring Hermione's demands that he join them. "Maximus Protego!" he chanted with a flourish of his wand. He moved to jump into the trench with the others.

Zero seconds.

---===oooOOOooo===---

From inside the trench the sky went as bright as a dozen noonday suns. Banner threw himself over the girl forcing her face down into the hard packed ground at the base of the trench. He had no doubt that he had hurt her, but better that than she see her friend die.

After avery few seconds the body of Harry Potter fell onto the shield he had cast, and settled there for almost two seconds before falling through into trench on top of them.

---===oooOOOooo===---

A/N: Yes I know that this base has the very worst perimeter security in any universe, and I know that the US doesn't do above ground testing and hasn't since sometime in the 60s. But Hey this is a variation of the Marvel Universe where Nuclear Weapons (and their Gamma variants) are used all the time. Further when you consider that in the Canon original Rick Jones' only reason for DRIVING HIS CONVERTIBLE onto a top secret military testing base was he was dared to do so by his school friends, so at least my version has Rick doing it for a good (if stupid and poorly thought out) reason.

A preview of the next chapter:

Hermione had been through hell. Men dressed in what she recognized from her father's love of science fiction movies as anti-contamination suits had pulled her from the trench, separated her from Harry's unmoving form, stripped her naked and physically pulled her into a shower thing that was spraying the most unpleasant liquids that she was fairly sure had no water in them. Once in the shower her hair was shorn from her *entire* body and she was roughly scrubbed until she was sure that there wasn't a single square micron of her body that didn't hurt.

When they were done with her, she was subjected to a humiliating battery of tests where dozens of men examined her entire naked body in the most utter clinical detail. In short she had been washed, shaved, prodded, poked, probed and humiliated beyond her worst nightmares. Then she was given a shot and she woke up in this grey chamber with no windows, a locked door and a constant hum.

Looking about she found at the foot of the cot she had awoken on a set of medical scrubs, that she put on immediately, then started banging on the door. She tried for what seemed an hour but was actually only ten minutes, then returned to the cot nursing her sore arms.

The door opened and a tall black man in a military uniform entered the room. The left side of the man's face was scarred, his left eye covered by a leather patch.

"Good Morning Miss Granger. My name is General Nick Fury. You can call me 'Sir'. I am the executive director of the Strategic Hazard Intervention, Espionage Logistics Directorate ."

"SHIELD."Hermione breathed.

"Very good Miss Granger. Very few of your countrymen would be able to identify my organization so readily. Even fewer of your fellow magic users."

"M-m-m-magic?"she stuttered, shocked that he would know of such things.
"There's no such thing as magic."

"Miss Granger, please." The man took the position she recognized as a military 'parade rest'. "Don't insult my intelligence, or the intelligence gathering abilities of my organization. The young man in your company is one Harry James Potter, heir to the Noble House of Potter and the Ancient and Noble House of Black. The defeater of The Dark Lord Voldemort at the age of fifteen months. Since that time he has the record for direct confrontations with the aforementioned Dark Lord by a magic user at five. I know all about your little 'magical world' and its ongoing civil war." He stepped closer to the young woman. "So tell me Miss Granger, what were two British Wand Wizards doing at atop secret Weapons test?"

Investigation

July 31, 1997

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

4:56 pm

G-Hour

From inside the trench the sky went as bright as a dozen noonday suns. Banner threw himself over the girl forcing her face down into the hard packed ground at the base of the trench. He had no doubt that he had hurt her, but better that than she see her friend die.

No one thought to tell Rick Jones not to look up. He had been staring at the raven haired man who was waving a stick and chanting in bad Latin. Jones winced when the sky lit up, and his jaw dropped when the young man standing at the lip of the trench seemed to become transparent with blood red luminous bones. There was... something swirling about the body of the man, it looked like... like the illustrations of a magnetic field from his dimly remembered science classes from school... the patterns that iron filings took on when in a magnetic field, only with a green tinge. That greenish field pulsed bright enough to outshine the sky as the man stood there, his mouth open, seemingly trying to scream, but no sound came. Then the sound did come. The sound of the bomb. More noise than Jones had ever imagined possible.

The noises seemed to buffet the man and he fell forward into the trench, except he stopped in his fall directly over Jones' head. He seemed to just hang there, then slowly, as if sinking through a thick liquid; he fell atop a most severely weirded out Rick Jones.

---===oooOOOooo===---

July 31, 1997

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

5:19 pm

Twenty three minutes after G-Hour

Senior Airman Jason Bowen was experiencing a massive high from just being on the same base as the explosion of the Gamma Bomb less than a half hour before.

"I'm tellin'ya Sarge. That was the coolest thing I've ever seen. I thought that the grenade drills from guard training was cool, but..."

Technical Sergeant Andy Delfino shook his head. Sure things that went BOOM were a lot of fun, but the perimeter patrol afterward wearing anti-contamination suits while inspecting the monitoring equipment and bunkers for damage ground the fun off the evolution in quick order. Then something

caught his eye, distorted by the plastic facemask. He turned his head to look at it dead on, but still couldn't identify what it was. "What the hell is that?" he said pointing toward Bunker 9.

Bowen's eyes followed his sergeants pointed hand and raised his binoculars. "It looks like a vehicle. That wasn't there this morning. Did someone tow an old wreck out here to see what happened to it, like they did with those ships for that island they blew up back in your day?"

Delfino refrained from pointing out to the kid that the *Anawetok test* was substantially before his enlistment began. Making a mental note to assign the smart ass to the next particularly nasty job that came along the pike, he turned the wheel to direct his Humvee toward the smoking mass. He keyed the microphone inside his suit. "Boom Box, Scavenger Two. Something out by Bunker Nine is smoking. Deviating from patrol to investigate."

"Roger Two." The radio crackled in his ear. "We see the smoke from here; we've no idea what it is. Deviation from your patrol area is authorized." *Oh goodie.* Delfino thought. *I have permission to do what I'm doing. Where would we be without the graduates of the Colorado Springs Vo-Tech?* "The good news" The voice on the radio continued, "is that none of the instrumentation is detecting any residual radiation."

"Roger Boom Box. Heading to Bunker Nine."

"Well that's good news." Bowen said. "Can we get out of these canary suits?"

"Sorry, no." Delfino sighed, didn't this kid pay attention to the mission profiles? "Protocol has us in these damned things until we return to processing for an in depth and personal checkout."

The trip to the unknown fire took most of twenty minutes, the closer they got the more the smoking mass looked like a vehicle. Parking the humvee they approached the mass on foot.

"Sarge." Bowen said. "This ain't a car. This is at least two... no, three different vehicles. Christ Sarge, one of 'ems a Hummer!"

"Yeah. I see that." Delfino stumbled over something in the dirt. "What the fuck?" Bending over he lifted the rectangular something to where he could see it. His blood suddenly went cold. Keying his microphone he made his report. "Boom box, this is Scavenger Two. The smoke is coming from the remains of what appears to be three, that is One-Two-Three, vehicles, one of which appears to be a project Humvee, the others are civilian vehicles. Boom Box, I've found a Stark Datapad out here."

"Scavenger Two, Boom Box. Are you serious Sergeant?"

This butter bar was seriously getting on Delfino's nerves. Did the young idiot actually think Delfino would joke about something like that? "Affirmative

Boom Box. We have three vehicles indicating at least three individuals and a Stark Datapad."

There was a short pause, and then a new voice, one that Delfino recognized as belonging to Major Talbot came was in his ears. "Scavenger Two, this is Boom Box Actual. Understand you have the remains of three vehicles at your location. Any signs of bodies?"

"Negative Sir. Just three wrecks clustered practically on top of each other and a Datapad."

"Understood Two. Scavenger Units One and Three, Converge on Two's position near Bunker Nine to assist with the search."

"Scavenger One acknowledged."

"Scavenger Three acknowledged."

"What's going on Sarge?"

"Bowen, we just lit off a big fucking bomb in the middle of what was supposed to be a clear safe area. Three vehicles were destroyed, that means at

least three people were out here when the bomb went boom. One of them dropped a Stark Datapad. Those are only used by the Brainiacs in charge. This means that somewhere out here one of the big brains behind this project is probably laying dead."

"Crap."

Delfino reflected on Bowen's way with words.

----===oooOOOooo===----

July 31, 1997

Nevada Nuclear Test Site

5:32 pm

Thirty six minutes after G-Hour

Hermione Granger cradled Harry Potter's head in her lap while tears flowed down her cheeks. Nothing that was happening made the slightest bit of sense. How was it even remotely possible they could drive into the middle of a weapons testing area without even being challenged? Why had Harry not jumped into this trench with her, and then called the two men? Why hadn't he cast his shield from inside the trench? Damn him and his 'people saving thing'. Now he lay unconscious in the floor of this pit they found themselves

in, his clothing burnt and crumbling at her touch, the only part of his wand to survive the blast was that shielded by his hand, the skin on his back a blackened blistering horror

Worst of all, his shield was still in place, though that made no sense either, without out his conscious mind and intent behind it, the silly shield should have faded almost instantly. Unlike herself, the two Muggles seemingly couldn't see the shield, but they could tell it was there. The one in the lab coat was calling it a 'force field' (which she supposed it was) and was postulating that it was caused by the interaction of some localized mineral deposit and the energy from something he called the 'Gamma Bomb'.

Hermione looked up just in time to see the shimmering silver tinged shield fade to nothing when a sharp pop sounded. What the hell was going on? A shield falling wasn't supposed to make any noise. She wiped at her eyes as the younger man helped the man in the lab coat attempt to climb out of the trench, only to fall back in. A figure clad in yellow from head to toe appeared at the lip of the trench, his face covered in a black breathing mask.

"Doctor Banner?" the man's voice muffled by his mask. "We never thought it would be you out here."

"We need to institute the Spa Treatment protocol. The four of us were out her during the detonation. This young man," the man called 'Banner' indicated Harry "was in the open during the explosion."

The man in yellow indicated that his understanding with an exaggerated nod. Then he was speaking again. "Boom Box, Scavenger Three. I have located survivors. I say again, I have located survivors. Have identified Dr. Robert Banner among them. Dr. Banner has called for Spa Treatment protocol."

----==oooOOOooo==----

July 31, 1997

New York City.

Ulva Restaurant

8:52 pm EDT

Fifty Eight minutes after G-Hour

Nicholas Joseph Fury looked over the rim of his wine glass at the young woman sitting across from him. A devastatingly beautiful model half his age, Nick enjoyed his time with Nicola Jasmine mostly because she wasn't impressed with him, his cover or his reputation and wasn't looking for anything from him beyond the casual encounters they both enjoyed.

After three wives, Fury wasn't in the market for anything more than casual encounters. His steak and her pasta had just arrived when his cell phone started chirping.

"Excuse me." He said perfunctorily not really caring if she did. He rose from the table and opened his phone as he made his way to the hallway that led to the restrooms.

"Fury." He said into the phone. The security function of the phone did an instant analysis of his voice to confirm his identity. A low tone sounded three times to signify a positive ID. Fury was rewarded by a burst of static over the earpiece that told him that the encryption suite was engaging. Seventeen seconds later the voice of Jasper Sitwell was in Fury's ear.

"Pardon the interruption General. There's been a problem at Project Boom Box."

Problem. That word worried Fury, Sitwell tended to understate things, and for him to call something a 'problem' meant that Fury would probably be calling out the Avengers shortly. "What kind of problem?"

"The details are not clear yet. We are currently one hour since detonation. What we do know is this: Somehow three civilians got onto the test site immediately prior to the event. They were spotted by Dr. Banner himself, who then rather than abort the countdown went to get the intruders out of the danger zone. They were all crowded round a locked bunker building five miles from the bomb when it was detonated."

"Damn. Have they located the bodies?"

"That's part of the problem Sir." Sitwell hesitated. "They're all alive."

Fury paused while digesting this bit of information. Sitwell said that the bomb detonated, so how were they alive? "Have you IDed the civilians?"

"Yes sir. The first is one Richard Milhouse Jones, Twenty two; late of Gary Indiana. He is currently going through the radiological decontamination scrub down that Banner has designated 'Spa Treatment'. The other two are British. The names we have for them are Hermione Jane Granger and Harry James Potter. Their Passport records show them both to be eighteen, but if they are who I think they are, they're a year younger. They are both tentatively identified as Class W. The woman is undergoing the scrub, the man is badly injured and the doctors are still deciding the best method to decontaminate him."

"Injured? How?"

"From what we've gathered so far, Potter got everyone else into one of the emergency trenches, but was standing in the open when the weapon detonated. He's horribly burnt, but so far no one can explain how he's still alive."

"So we have a pair of British teenaged Class Ws at a test of a new strategic

weapon?" Fury tried to see a way to avoid doing what he knew he was going to do. "Evoke Strategic Override. Pick them up. Ross can keep Banner and the Jones kid. I want the Class Ws here as soon as possible."

"The pickup team is at the main gate of Boom Box now General." Sitwell was very good at anticipating his boss's decisions.

"Good job Sitwell." He glanced at his watch. "I'll be in the office in twenty minutes. Call all the section chiefs."

"Yes sir General. The staff will be standing by."

Fury closed his phone, breaking the connection. Returning to the table, he opened his wallet and laid Two hundred dollars on the table. "That was work." He said simply. "I've got to go. Can you catch a cab home?"

The woman smiled. "Just go Nicky. I'm not helpless. Call me when you're available again, we can pick this up where we left off."

Yes. Fury thought. *This one definitely had possibilities.*

====oooOOOooo====

July 31, 1997

New York City.

SHIELD Headquarters

10:20 pm EDT

Two Hours Twenty Four minutes after G-Hour

Fury strode into the conference room dressed in his green Service Uniform to find his section chiefs at their places.

"Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen. Lets get started shall we? Science Section?"

The Grey haired woman from the Science Directorate spoke up. "Project Boom Box proceeded normally through its programmed countdown. Detonation of the device was precisely on schedule at 4:56 pm Pacific Daylight time," she glanced at the clock, "Two hours twenty five minutes ago. The yield has been estimated to be slightly more than five hundred kilotons, only two percent more than the computer projections. In short, purely from a Science Directorate point of view, the test was flawless."

"Thank you. Security?"

"According to the preliminary interviews, Dr. Robert Banner was taking a final look at the device at 4:32 pm Pacific Daylight Time, during this he spotted a vehicle in the vicinity of Bunker Nine." The young Asian man manipulated some controls on the tabletop in front of himself and a holographic display of the Nevada Nuclear Test Site bloomed in the middle of the table, with the Command Bunker, weapon placement and Bunker Nine high lighted. "Dr. Banner instructed his aide, Dr. Emil Blonsky to abort the countdown, and then for reasons he hasn't yet explained personally went to inspect the vehicle rather than send base security. Banner took one of the Project Humvees and drove out to find one Richard Jones, who had apparently entered the base in an attempt to garner publicity for his musical career. It was then Banner discovered via his Datapad that the countdown had not been stopped and Bunker Nine was locked."

"Why had the Countdown not been aborted?" the woman from the Medical Directorate asked.

"A full investigation is still getting started, but Blonsky doesn't seem to have attempted to abort the countdown. The reason for this is still unknown; Blonsky has been taken into custody for questioning." He looked for more questions. "This was when the second vehicle carrying Granger and Potter arrived. Miss Granger claims that they had gotten lost looking for the Moapa Paiutes Reservation and had entered the base via an open gate intending to ask directions. We believe this to be the same gate Jones broke into to gain his own entry. Banner then directed everyone to one of the emergency trenches. Potter and Granger got to the trench first, Potter pushed Miss Granger into the trench, then did *something* to pull Banner and Jones to him at high speed. Once they had joined Miss Granger, Potter remained outside the trench, doing something with what Banner described as a 'stick' and the

device detonated while he was still above ground." The Security Section Chief paused to sip from his glass of water. "Banner was on top of the girl, forcing her into a 'duck and cover' position. Jones was watching Potter. He claims that Potter's flesh went transparent for a time. This was probably just the light from the detonation. He also claims that he saw something like a magnetic field or an aura surrounding Potter. The Shockwave from the detonation knocked Potter into the trench. Somehow what Banner describes as an 'invisible force field' formed over the trench. Banner postulates that it is due to an interaction between the energy of the Gamma burst and an unknown mineral deposit in the area. The 'force field' contained the four of them in the trench until it released with an audible sound they describe as a 'pop'. This sound attracted the attention of one of the search party, who called in to report finding them."

"Thank you." Fury paused digesting all of this. A force field? "Medical?"

"The three conscious survivors are all seemingly unaffected by their exposure. All went through the 'Spa Treatment' decontamination scrub downs as a precaution despite showing almost no signs of radiological contamination. I have no explanation for this lack of contamination. The only contamination on any of them can be traced to exposure to Potter. Which brings me to the odd part." The woman in white manipulated some of the controls imbedded in the table top in front of her position and a large screen came to life on one end of the room displaying a naked man laying face down on an hospital bed, his rear side from skull to heels was burnt black and blistered. "This is Harry James Potter. His passport lists his age as eighteen today, but our colleagues in Section W tell me he's fudged a bit somehow and is actually 17. As you can see, he suffered third degree burns over sixty percent of his body. Our readings found high levels of radiological contamination all over his body. At least at first."

"Meaning?" Fury asked.

"Our medics on the scene had the problem of attempting to decontaminate him in this condition. In the seventeen minutes between his preliminary radiological scan and the diagnostic scan the readings dropped to below normal background."

"What cleaned him up?" The Science Section Chief asked.

"We have no idea." Medical continued. "The radiological material was still on his body, embedded in his skin, but it had been rendered inert, with no apparent outside cause."

Every eye in the room moved to the Department Head for Section W.

"Don't look at me." He said shaking his head. "There is almost no interaction between magic users and radiological events. Nagasaki was a city that Japanese Magic Users avoided for cultural reasons, and Hiroshima had a huge seer's event that chased every Magic User from the city well before the bomb dropped there. Science among Magic Users pretty much stopped at Alchemy, with potions being more akin to cooking than chemistry. The Transuranics aren't even on a Wizards fantasy list."

"Mr. Potter's oddity continues." The woman in white continued. "The medical team on site attempted to deal with his burns by performing an emergency debraiding." She pushed a button. "This is what they found."

The image blurred, then changed to a team in yellow anti-contamination suits using surgical tools to ease the tension on the charred skin, when a large piece, perhaps six inches square sloughed off, exposing damp pink skin underneath.

"Somehow, Mr. Potter had regenerated the burnt skin in a matter of minutes. The burned flesh would have come off on its own, but our team helped it along."

"It that an aspect of magic?" Fury asked.

The man who represented Section W shook his head. "Given a team of healers and several different potions, maybe. Spontaneously? No."

"Psi Section?"

The youngest person in the room put down her Big Gulp cup and leaned back in her chair. We got a full six man team from the Seattle office to the site one hour after detonation. Both of the Brits believe themselves to be who their documentation says they are. I use that qualification because both of them

show signs of mental manipulation over a long period of time. I had to put a stop to our people linking with Potter because of the effect doing so was having on them."

Fury really disliked this kid. She had joined the Psi section at the age of twelve, and had risen through the ranks to become Department head of the section in only seven years. She was the very best at what she did among those not wearing an X on their clothing, and she was arrogantly dismissive of most of those who did. At her interview for advancing to Department Head she had told Fury '*Xavier is good. The rest of them? Pah!*' Her habit of making statements that left you hanging was one of her more annoying habits.

"What effect was Potter having on them?"

"The three who linked to him, one man, two women, all offered their resignations. When I refused, pointing to their contracts, they requested leaves of absences so that they might go to the UK and deal with some people who had mistreated the boy." She started to pause, but saw Fury's eyes flash. "He has a history of mistreatment and abuse from his earliest memories. Abuse from his guardians, mental manipulation from his Headmaster, mind rape from his Potions teacher and that magical Dark Lord that the Brits are always going on about. Having shared his experiences via the link, they want to go to the UK and kill some people. Potter is evidently a very sweet kid despite everything that has been done to him. Anyway, that's why I've put him off limits to the psi teams until I can take a look inside his skull myself."

Fury nodded. A reasonable precaution. "Section M?"

The man to Psi Section's immediate right shook his head. "No evidence of an active X gene in either of them. No evidence of any mutations of any kind outside of their ability to access magic."

"Section W?"

The Wizard looked up from his notes. "I have positive ID on the pair. One of my West Coast operatives who responded to the incident is a Brit who was four years ahead of Potter and Granger at their school 'Hogwarts', she IDed them both. No question about it. We got a second confirmation from our agent inside Hogwarts. Miss Granger is a First Generation Witch, which is a magic user born to mundanes. Very intelligent, if there's any justice in the world she will be the Head Girl this year." He looked up from his notes and saw the lack of understanding among his peers. "Head Girl is an honor bestowed upon a class leader. By all rights it should be hers, but she is a First Generation and the politics of the school play against her. Mr. Potter is, well, Harry Potter. The young man is, within the magical community, internationally famous."

"How so?" Fury asked.

"The world's magical communities have a problem with 'Dark' Magic users coming to power. The most recent was/is The Dark Lord Voldemort. His rise to power through the 1970s reached a point where the British Ministry of

Magic was in danger of falling. My predecessor in this position had plans for a SHIELD assault on him to prevent that from happening. However before that happened, Voldemort was stopped by Harry Potter in 1981."

"That would have made him less than two years old." Psi pointed out.

"Fifteen months to be exact. What actually happened is not clear, but Voldemort was disembodied from November 81 to May 95 when he used a ritual involving among other things the blood of Mr. Potter to create a homunculus to house his soul in. Potter managed to escape and tried to warn the British Ministry of Magic of Voldemort's return. He was ignored due to the political ambitions of the current Minister. One of our agents in the British Ministry reports that there was a prophecy in the British Department of Mysteries that alluded to Potter being the only one capable of killing Voldemort."

"I've never met a man that couldn't be killed. Some of them are difficult, but everyone dies eventually." Fury growled. "Alright. Does anyone here believe that these two Brits appeared at Boom Box intending to steal the Gamma Bomb?"

His question was greeted with silence. Then Sector W spoke. "If they were purebloods, possibly. Given that they are both mundane raised, and absolutely have to be aware of the destructive capability of the smallest nuclear weapon, coupled with the relatively easier access they would have had to one of the British weapons depots, I would say no."

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Hermione had been through hell. Men dressed in what she recognized from her father's love of science fiction movies as anti-contamination suits had pulled her from the trench, separated her from Harry's unmoving form, stripped her naked and physically pulled her into a shower thing that was spraying the most unpleasant foul smelling liquids that she was fairly sure had no water in them. Once in the shower her hair was shorn from her *entire* body and she was roughly scrubbed until she was sure that there wasn't a single square micron of her body that didn't hurt.

When they were done with her, she was subjected to a humiliating battery of tests where dozens of men examined her entire naked body in the most utter clinical detail. Then she had been questioned a length, and no one would tell her anything about Harry. In short she had been washed, shaved, prodded, poked, probed, questioned and humiliated beyond her worst nightmares. Then she was given an injection and she woke up in this grey chamber with no windows, a locked door and a constant hum.

Looking about she found a the foot of the cot she had awoken on a set of medical scrubs, that she put on immediately, then started banging on the door. She tried for what seemed an hour but was actually less than ten minutes, then returned to the cot nursing her sore arms.

The door opened and a tall black man in a green military uniform entered the room. The left side of the man's face was scarred, his left eye covered by a leather patch. His uniform blouse sported several rows of pieces of ribbons

on the left side and a black nameplate on the right with **FURY** embossed in white letters.

"Good Morning Miss Granger. My name is General Nick Fury. You can call me 'Sir'. I am the executive director of the Strategic Hazard Intervention, Espionage Logistics Directorate."

"SHIELD." Hermione breathed.

"Very good Miss Granger. Very few of your countrymen would be able to identify my organization so readily. Even fewer of your fellow magic users."

"M-m-m-magic?" she stuttered, shocked that he would know of such things. "There's no such thing as magic."

"Miss Granger, please." The man took the position she recognized as a military 'parade rest'. "Don't insult my intelligence, or the intelligence gathering abilities of my organization. The young man in your company is one Harry James Potter, heir to the Noble House of Potter and the Ancient and Noble House of Black. The Defeater of The Dark Lord Voldemort at the age of fifteen months. Since that time he has the record for direct confrontations with the aforementioned Dark Lord by a magic user at five. I know all about your little 'magical world' and its ongoing civil war." He stepped closer to the young woman. "So tell me Miss Granger, what were two British Wand Wizards doing at atop secret Weapons test?"

"It was an accident! Honestly it was. We got lost looking for the Moapa Paiutes Reservation. We had an appointment to speak with one of the tribal Shaman, Alexander Grayson."

"We'll be checking on that." His face softened. "I regret the circumstances of out meeting Miss Granger. I take no pleasure in your discomfort. I will see what I can do about your clothing. What you were wearing was destroyed in the decontamination process, and your luggage was destroyed along with your rental car."

"The car was destroyed?"

"Yes it was." He'd seen this before. The girl was coming down off her initial adrenaline rush and was having difficulty believing what was happening to her. That above all else told him she was telling the truth.

"Good thing we took the extra insurance I guess." Hermione said quietly.

Fury looked at her closely. He would need to get someone to stay with her.

"What about Harry?" She asked, suddenly taking a fresh interest. "Can I see him?"

"Mr. Potter is still unconscious Ms. Granger, he was hurt badly, but our doctors tell me he'll be fine. When Mr. Potter regains consciousness I'll see to it you get to see him."

"Thank you."

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A/N: Afew thoughts

Some of the questions in the reviews keep reoccurring, so I thought I'd answer them here.

Why does Hermione know about SHIELD? Mostly because, in the version of the Marvel universe I'm using, SHIELD is not the secret organization whose name must never be spoken immortalized in the Steranko era (for non-comics geeks, Jim Steranko is one of the Gods of comics art. He took over Nick Fury Agent of SHIELD art from Jack Kirby (another god) and changed a minor back story into its own book and practically invented the Silver Age. But I digress). Rather it is a publicly known organization that does secret things. Think CIA or NSA

on steroids. Pretty much everyone knows they exist, but the actual operations are (in theory) secret. I mean the organization has several flying air craft carriers that fly over New York City for goodness sake, how secret could they be? Fury was commenting on Hermione's instant understanding of what the Strategic Hazard Intervention, Espionage Logistics Directorate was.

Did Banner become the Hulk? No.

Why didn't Harry and Hermione just grab Banner and Jones and Apparate away? Because that would have made for a very short story.

How is the Gamma Bomb going to affect Harry? That would be telling.

How does Gamma radiation affect magic? That would also be telling.

Preparation

August 1, 1997

8:22 am EDT

Hermione woke to find herself still in the grey chamber. Shaking her head to as if to clear her thought processes; she ran her hand over her head, finding only rough fuzz where her bushy hair has previously been.

That brought about a grimace. She had never liked her hair, but even at its worst, her bushy thatch of hair was better than this. She made her way to the small toilet/shower room connected to her 'bedchamber' and set about cleaning herself. When she was done, she found several more sets of the surgical scrubs she had been given. She dressed quickly, wondering where the monitoring equipment was. It was there, she was sure of it, but the young Witch couldn't find it.

Her suspicions were confirmed when the door to the room opened as soon as she had seated herself on the only furniture in the room, the cot. Through the open door a short red-haired woman dressed in jeans, open toed sandals and a black tee-shirt declaring her allegiance to *Hooty and the Blowfish*, while the door sealed behind the newcomer.

"Morning." The woman who appeared to be more or less Hermione's age said as a chair unfolded itself from the seemingly seamless wall. The young woman seated herself then seemed to remember something. She fished in the pocket of her low cut jeans and pulled out a small crystal vial.

"Catch." She said tossing the vial to Hermione in an underhand throw. "The chemists in Section W said that this would help with your hair problem."

"Chemists?" Hermione asked. "Section W?"

"If I was at liberty to discuss it with you I might say that Section W was a group within S.H.I.E.L.D. made up of magic users like yourself, but I'm not, so I won't." She grinned. "As far as the Chemists, what do you call your people who make stuff in cauldrons? You know, 'Eye of newt and toe of frog, Wool of bat and tongue of dog, Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting, Lizard's leg and owlet's wing. For a charm of powerful trouble, like a hell-broth boil and bubble.'"

Hermione blinked. "It's not often I get Shakespeare quoted at me. Do you mean you have Potions Masters working for SHIELD?"

"If I were likely to discuss something like that with someone lacking a security clearance such as yourself, then yeah, that's what I would likely mean." The young woman smiled wider. "It was suggested that the goop be applied topically, rather than drinking it."

"Thank you. Obviously you know who I am, who are you? Are you a witch?"

"I've been called worse. But if you mean am I magical, the answer is no. My name, well, more of that security I'm afraid. You can call me Psi."

“Ok.” Hermione wasn’t used to dealing with normal people who knew of the magical world. Si was an odd name... Short for something? An abbreviation? “For the record, don’t try that potions recipe.”

“Excuse me?”

“Mixing newt eyes, frog toes, bat fur, dog tongue, adder’s tongue, screwt stingers, Lizards legs and the wing of an owlet will produce a rather noxious gas.”

“Are you serious?” The redhead seemed a bit incredulous.

“Yeah, I tried it second year to see what would happen. That potions lab still stinks to high heaven.” Hermione smiled at the memory, and then sobered. “How much trouble am I in?”

The redhead shook her head. “I have no idea, that’s not really my department.”

“More security keeping you from telling me?”

“No. I really don’t know, and to tell you the truth, I don’t care all that much,” the woman said.

“Ok,” Hermione said recognizing that this woman was not going to volunteer any answers. “If my situation isn’t your department, what is?”

“Me? I’m interested in your mind.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. This woman couldn’t be more than twenty. “Aren’t you a little young to be a psychiatrist?”

“I’m not a shrink,” the woman laughed.

“If you’re not a psychiatrist, then what...” Realization of what the other woman was saying dawned. Not ‘Si’. PSI! Hermione concentrated and slammed her occlumency shields into place.

The other woman shook her head. “Miss Granger, relax, please. You have magical mental defenses designed to thwart magical mind reading. What I do isn’t magical in the slightest; all you are doing is giving yourself a headache. I’ve been in your mind since I entered the room.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Mostly I’m interested in finding out if you’ve managed to fool my field operatives. Three of them took a read on you while you were being decontaminated.”

Three people had been in her mind? Hermione hadn’t even felt the slightest touch of another consciousness. “And what have you decided?”

“No, you didn’t fool them. You are what they told me you are, an earnest hardworking student who has found herself in the middle of a war and who is doing her level best to assist her friends to save the world.” The woman smiled. “I usually only find that sort of mindset among people who wear spandex outfits and cause massive amounts of property damage in major cities.”

"I'm not a hero," Hermione said quietly. "I don't understand how you can just troll through people's minds like you do."

"It's my job," the woman shrugged. "I don't enjoy it, but it needs to be done. The alternative would be to pump you full of chemical truth serums until you told us everything you know." An odd look flickered across the woman's face. "Yes, that does include your truth potion."

"By what right are you invading my mind?" Hermione demanded.

"Miss Granger, you and your friend wandered into a weapons test that was classified higher than top secret. If you were in General Fury's place, what would you do?"

Damn it. That made sense. "All right. You've know what I'm thinking. From what I've read of Psi actives you didn't need to come into the room to look into my mind, why are you here?"

"There's more to the mind reading business than just tip toeing through someone's brain Miss Granger. I find it useful to actually see my subjects. My report to General Fury is going to say that you are exactly what you appear to be and that you actually did accidentally wander onto the test site."

"Thank you," Hermione said quietly. "What now?"

The woman who identified herself as Psi smiled. "Mostly we wait. I still need to dig into your friend's skull. I need to find out what it is about him that has affected so many of my operatives so fundamentally."

"Why wait?" Hermione asked. "From what I've read, his being unconscious isn't a inhibiting factor for someone like you."

Psi shrugged again. "I prefer to do my mind trips on conscious minds... Far too many odd things manifest in an unconscious psyche. Dealing with those things can do damage to the sleeper. Don't worry Miss Granger, our doctors tell me that he should be waking up tonight or tomorrow."

"Will I be allowed to see him?"

"As I understand it, that's the plan. Fury has pretty much decided to trust you; he's just waiting for my final survey of Mr. Potter's mind."

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August 1, 1997
9:13 pm GMT
London England
Savoy Hotel – Royal Suite

The woman stretched savoring the afterglow of the lovemaking.

"Ah, Nickie, I've missed you." She ran her fingertips over the tightly curled hairs on his chest. "Missed you so much."

Nick Fury chuckled. "Most of my debriefing interviews don't go quite this well."

"It's always work with you," She huffed. "All right, ask your questions."

"Tell me about Granger."

"You've read my reports. The girl is a certified genius, top of every class she's in." The woman allowed herself a small smile. "Except for mine."

"What's wrong with your class?" Fury asked, trying to build a better picture of the two Brit Class Ws that had fallen into his lap.

"Miss Granger is far too intelligent to fall for my shtick. I think she lasted three classes before she rampaged from my classroom. She's the third one in eighteen years."

"Hmm," Fury murmured.

"If you're recruiting, you could do a lot worse than Hermione Granger." She rose on her elbow so that she could look into his eye. "I would suggest that you don't use the same technique you used on me though."

"Why not?" Fury asked, smiling. "That method worked quite well as I recall."

"That was 1964 Nickie. You coming on to her would horrify her, probably give her creepy grandfather nightmares, not to mention that Potter would likely flay the skin from your body."

"Really?" Fury asked dryly.

"Ah I remember that day well, there I was, a young innocent freshly out of Hogwarts seeing the sights in Muggle London and here comes this dashing young officer, who defiled my body and bent me to his will..."

"That's a fairly revisionist retelling of the story Sybill. As I recall, you approached me in a pub and told me you'd never had a black man, and I was about to have a magical night. It wasn't until we'd been dating for a month that internal security told me about your talents and asked that I attempt to recruit you."

"Lies, all lies." Sybill Trelawney giggled. "I'll have you know General that my Inner Eye sees the past as clearly as it sees the future."

"That explains it then," Fury laughed. "Tell me about Potter."

Sybill sighed. "I owe that boy an apology, I truly do. When I was applying to Hogwarts for their Divination post, Dumbledore did his interview at a pub rather than at his office for some reason." She shrugged. "No idea why, but he did. Anyhow my interview wasn't going well. Dumbledore is an idiot in many ways, but he didn't buy into my 'Inner Eye' story. He was wrapping up the interview and it was obvious that I wasn't going to get the job, so I did the trance thing that Section W tells us is the technique most likely to convince people. I made some nonsense prediction about 'one with the power

the Dark Lord knows not' being born at the end of July. One of Riddle's troops was spying on our meeting and ran off to report what he heard to his master. It turned out that only two magical children were born at the end of July that year, Potter and a boy named Longbottom. Both Dumbledore and Riddle fixated on the Potter boy. Young Harry's parents were killed and the poor kid was sentenced to a most unfortunate life."

Fury nodded. "Psi said something about that."

"Anyhow, he's an adequate student, not as smart as Granger, but smart enough to know what I teach is crap. You should see some of the assignments he turns in. I keep copies of his works of fiction for when I get depressed by the true believers."

"And beyond the classroom?"

Trelawney frowned. "For a wizard, he's quite an athlete. Superb reflexes from what I hear, as my cover doesn't let me actually attend the games. A major oddity is his ability to speak with snakes."

"Snakes?" Fury repeated. "He speaks to snakes?"

"Yes. He speaks to snakes. It's an inherited ability among magic users. Fairly rare, most with the ability try to keep anyone from knowing because of the negative connotations for the ability. Because a few noted Dark Wizards could do it, it has become believed to be an indication of being evil. Potter was raised in the Mundane world and didn't know. He spoke to a snake in front of a large percentage of the school. Caused him quite a bit of trouble for a while, including from some of his closest friends."

"I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the idea that snakes can speak. How did Granger react?"

"She was shocked at first, but I believe that came mostly from suddenly discovering that someone she knew could speak with snakes. After the initial shock, Granger and Potter remained as tight as they are now."

"So basically, what you're telling me is that Potter is what his reputation says he is."

"As hard as it might be for a suspicious bastard like you to believe Nickie, yes. When it comes to Harry Potter, he is what you see. Your Psi section is wasting their time. The only secrets that boy has are those any boy his age would have... Plus the fact he has an invisibility cloak and a magical map that shows him where everyone in the castle is."

"An invisibility cloak? Are you telling me that there is a magical alternative to my seven billion dollar personal stealth project?"

"Yep." Sybill reached down and took hold of his manhood. "You really ought to have your Section W types set in on the R&D meetings. Enough talking about my students. You've had time to rest. Time for round two."

---===oooOOOooo===---

August 3, 1997

7:00 pm EDT

Hermione was escorted into yet another featureless grey room marked as a medical facility only by the medical equipment that beeped and flashed lights on either side of the bed. The door closed with the guard who escorted her remaining outside.

On the bed itself she could see Harry, still unconscious. A quartet of people dressed in white scurried around the bed, taking readings, one preparing to give an injection. Hermione found her mouth going dry. Harry?

“Good evening Miss Granger.”

Having someone speak her name without knowing that someone was there caused Hermione to jump.

“Sorry about that Miss Granger.” Said a blond woman dressed in black leather body armor. “Skulking around becomes second nature after a while.” She offered her hand, “Sharon Carter.”

“Agent Carter.” Hermione nodded taking the older woman’s hand.

“I’ve been assigned as General Fury’s personal representative for your case.” Carter said. “The doctors are waking your friend up.”

Hermione craned her neck trying to see Harry amid the people in white. “I wonder why they didn’t shave him.”

“They did.” Carter said. “It grew back overnight.” The blond glanced at Hermione’s fuzz. “I thought it was a magical thing, evidently not.”

“It’s Harry’s magical thing.” Hermione said. “He has a history of regrowing hair. Damn him.”

“Agent Carter?” One of the white clad doctors spoke from the bedside. “The patient is waking up.”

---===oooOOOooo===---

Let there be light, he remembered hearing those words... sometime.

And there was light. He remembered that too. The light had consumed the universe.

He remembered the light. It was everywhere and every when until it was gone. Completely and utterly gone.

He missed it.

Is this all there is?

Light, then nothing. Nothing for ever?

That seemed somehow unlikely. Forever was after all an exceedingly long time.

Not for the first time he tried to remember how he got here. Tried to remember the time before the light.

Had there been a time before the light? He thought that there might have been. Sometimes he had flashes of emotions and feelings from what he had come to think of as ‘the before time’.

Joy from moving through the air in the light holding... something between his legs, chasing a tiny golden... something... his arm outstretched, finger’s grasping.

Fear when he entered a darkened room to confront a towering... something wielding a club... screams of terror.

Need when he found a beautiful face, so very close, so wet? His hand lifting her chin, almond eyes closing, long hair as black as his own, so soft in his hands, a soft pressure on his lips... and a salty taste.

Terror as a serpentine... man? Rose from a bubbling liquid. Terror, pain... hope?

Loss when a bearded man fell backwards through... something.

Shock at finding a red haired girl doing horrible things to a brunette with huge mass of hair, while a blond man was looking on laughing.

Rage as a tall man with greasy hair and a hooked nose pulled him off that same blond man, but not before he had reduced the blonde’s face to a bloody pulp.

Was any of that real?

He struggled to try and remember more of the before time. Did he have a name? He was relatively sure that he in fact did have a name, but couldn’t remember any, not his own, nor any of the others he saw in his flashes of almost memories. He knew faces. There was the red headed boy, the brunette girl, the blond man, a red headed girl who seemed very like the ginger boy. The dark man with the hooked nose, the old man with the white beard that hung below his belt, he knew their faces, and he even imagined he knew the voices, but no names came to him.

It was very odd.

Suddenly he noticed a strange... buzzing? The last sound he could remember hearing was the sound of the light, and like the light it had filled the universe and then vanished. It had been a while since he had last noticed any sound, so this new feature of the time after the light focused his attention away from wondering what his name might be. Slowly the buzzing resolved into distinct sounds, then to voices... Was that... light?

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“Harry Potter?”

With great effort Harry managed to force his eyes open. He found a blurry face hovering over him.

“Madm Pmfry?” Harry whispered.

A pair of glasses was placed on his face, and the face came into focus. Whoever this woman was, Harry didn’t recognize her.

“I’m Healer Meyers Mr. Potter. You’ve giving us all something to think about here. It appears that you will be all right. You just need your rest.” The woman flashed that smile that all healers must learn during their training, the one that said that intense pain was in your future and the healer was going to try real hard not to laugh. “You’ve got a visitor.”

Harry tried to turn his head in the direction the Healer had indicated but found that to require far more energy than he had to spare at the moment. Hermione’s face came into view.

“Harry you prat.” She said softly. “What were you thinking casting the shield outside the hole?”

“Hey ‘mione. What happened to your hair?”

Hermione brushed a bit of his hair from Harry’s eyes. “They had to cut it in order to decontaminate me. I’ve tried a regrowth potion, but it doesn’t seem to be working. It will just have to grow out on its own. Enough about my hair. How are you?”

“Tired,” Harry said. “I just feel so... empty.”

“They tell my you expended a whole lot of magic healing yourself Harry.”

“I have?” Harry seemed confused. “I didn’t know I could do that.” The raven haired Wizard raised his right hand to lightly touch the side of Hermione’s head. “You look so different without your hair.”

The girl shrugged. “It’s just hair.”

“No. It’s part of you. It’s... pretty.” There was a sudden pop as the medical electronic devices all stopped working and started emitting smoke. Harry’s hand slipped from Hermione’s head as the boy lost consciousness. “so very pretty,” He whispered.

“What the hell?” The woman who identified herself to Harry as Healer Meyers said. “These things are supposed to be hardened to magic.”

It was only then that the healer noticed that everyone else in the room was staring at Hermione Granger.

The young witch noticed the attention she was getting, and self consciously brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. “What?”

“Your hair Miss Granger.” Sharon Carters said. “It’s grown back.”

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August 5, 1997

SHIELD Executive Director’s Conference Room

10:00 am GMT

Fury took his seat and asked his first question without preamble.

“Medical?”

“The young woman is seemingly none the worse for wear from her adventures. I’ve no explanation for her spontaneous hair growth, but I believe Section W has something to say about that as part of his presentation.”

“And Potter?” the General asked.

The woman looked uncomfortable, but continued. “Potter’s recovery is nothing less than amazing. The only time I have seen a superior self healing ability was when I was part of the Weapon X program.”

“I have rerun all tests for an active X-gene seven times.” Section M said from his position. Potter is not a Mutant.”

“Yes.” Medical agreed. “He has demonstrated the ability to heal himself and others. As far as his injuries go, there is absolutely no indication that he was ever in the blast. Even the radioactive materials that the blast embedded into his skin that had somehow been rendered inert are now gone.”

“Gone where?” Security asked.

“Unknown. They are just gone. Old injuries we found when we first treated him no longer exist. Medically he is in perfect shape.”

Fury nodded. “Psi Section?”

The young woman leaned forward putting her elbows on the table and steepled her fingers. “Granger is what she appears to be. A genius being forced to deal with things outside her experience. She is amazingly resilient and adaptable. You asked me to evaluate her for recruitment General. You could do a lot worse. In fact you have. What I can tell you is that she will not accept your offer as long as she thinks Potter needs her.

“And Potter?”

The woman grimaced. “He is something of an enigma... Following the incident he was mind scanned by three different operatives, and I made a shallow scan myself while he was unconscious. I held off on deep probes until he was conscious, due to the hazards of an unconscious mind. However since he has woken up from his injuries, I can’t scan him at all.”

“Do you think his subconscious mind discovered how to shield against psi intrusions from one of your field operatives looking through his mind?” Fury asked.

“No.” The Head of Psi-ops said shaking her head. “I don’t know what he’s doing, but it isn’t a Psi shield. It’s not one of their magical mind blocks either. I’ve always gotten something from a person I was trying to read, whether it be Xavier, Lehnsherr, Frost, Braddock, Grey, or even that Alien Uatu there is always something there, a hint of a mind, a whisper, even static. From Potter, I get nothing. It’s

almost as if he's not there."

"What about when he's sleeping?" The head of Medical asked.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. I can't describe what it's like for me. It would be as if any of you were suddenly deaf to a single person. I've had every Psi active onboard try to take a read on him. They all report the same thing."

Fury nodded. This was an unexpected situation. Could this sudden immunity to Psi be an aspect of his exposure to the Gamma radiation? "Section W?"

"Potter used his magic to heal himself, though he isn't aware of how he did this."

"How do you know that?" Security asked.

"Much like his new immunity to Psi scans, he is also somehow blocked off from Legilimency. This has reduced our intelligence on him to his conversations with Miss Granger, all of which are recorded and available for study to all code word cleared personnel. He is as puzzled at what his magic has done as any of us. Upon waking he was suffering from magical exhaustion, meaning his reserves of magic were basically bled dry. Despite this he managed a pulse of magic that fried every piece of electronics within thirty meters."

"What does that mean?" Psi asked, clearly frustrated.

"It means that in a state of exhaustion, he is one of the most powerful magic users in history." The Wizard paused. "General, you asked me to evaluate Potter for recruitment. My recommendation is to pass on him. He is too much of an unknown to chance. He is insanely more powerful than his reputation would lead me to think he should be."

"How so?" Fury asked.

"It has been two days since he woke up. He was in a state of magical exhaustion. For a normal Wizard recovering from exhaustion, after two or three days he could attempt the easiest of spells. I spent some time with him today, challenging him to try a few things. I can say with no hesitation that he is more powerful than I am. The only way I kept up with him was to keep shotgunning energy potions and I'm going to pay for that when they wear off tonight. He also burned through four of my duty operatives, just in the sheer volume of his casting."

Silence held reign in the conference room. Someone too powerful for SHIELD. That was a concept that took some thinking about.

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August 8, 1997

3:24 pm GMT

SHIELD Section W Training Facility

Harry moved to his left while conjuring a four foot high block of stone, silently cursing the wound that his one of his opponent had just opened in his left shoulder. The wand that the men in black leather had

made for him was amazing. It was as if he could sense magic while using it, feel it's ebb and flow.

Twirling the black wand at his shoulder, the wound knitted closed in a fraction of a second. Harry paused for a moment to examine the wand, made of black carbon fibers that he had been told were 'fullerene nanotubes', what ever they were, wrapped around a synthetic diamond core. Harry didn't understand any of that, but sweet Merlin did this wand work.

Harry concentrated on the flow of magic in the room, there were seven bundles of magic in the room other than himself, two were on the floor not moving. Five were moving to bracket him. Three of the moving magic masses were directly on the other side of his stone shield. Harry focused and banished the stone across the room, smashing directly into two of his attackers and clipping one other with enough force to take all three out of the fight.

The two agents who remained standing exchanged a look, then immediately began casting. Harry dodged while icing the floor under the agent's feet. This was actually a lot of fun.

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"He's quite impressive."

Hermione turned from the observation port to face Fury. "I find myself wondering what the price for the support you've given us is going to be General."

Fury sat on the chair next to the girl. "What makes you think there is going to be a price Miss Granger?"

"Call it a fundamental understanding of how governmental organizations work." Hermione said. "What dealings I've had with them has left me somewhat cynical."

"I don't know why I'm surprised really. I only a bit older than you when I got my first case of cynicism" Fury smiled. The girl was a bit young for what he was going to offer her. "My price to your boyfriend is to take your Dark Lord out, and to do it right this time."

"And what do you care about Voldemort? And Harry isn't my boyfriend."

Fury smiled at her response. "The maniac isn't keeping to your little magical enclave, he's out killing normal people. If Potter doesn't kill him, I'll have to do it. If I have to put men into the field against him it will get messy."

"I see. You want Harry to do your job for you."

"I'm not sure you actually understand Miss Granger. My brief is to fight terrorists, where ever they might be. I am however required to allow the local populations to fight their own battles and step in only as a last resort. Normally that means the local governments, but in your case your government seems to either be in deep denial about the problem or is actively aligned with Voldemort, that leaves Mr. Potter and those of you aligned with him."

"But you could..."

“Yes,” Fury agreed. “I could land a brigade of troops and lay waste to ever fighter that your Ministry or Voldemort could muster, and then of course, the magic using population would love and support my people, right?”

“Of course they would.”

“A casual reading of history shows that Armies of Liberation become Armies of Occupation in very short order, and tend to be deeply hated by those they liberated. Come now Miss Granger, how happy would your classmates be to see a squad of my people performing searches for those bearing the ‘dark mark’?”

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but couldn’t think of anyway to refute the General’s position. She returned her attention to Harry, who was now standing over the last of the SHIELD agents he had been dueling. “You spoke of what you expected of Harry for the help you’ve given us. What do you want from me?”

Fury reached into his jacket and from an inside pocket withdrew an envelope. “Your consideration of this offer.”

Hermione opened the envelope and scanned the contents. “You’re offering me a job?”

“From what I hear of the British Magical Society, you might find it somewhat difficult to find a position that matches your abilities given your heritage. What I can offer you is substantially more... vital.”

Hermione stared at the offer for several seconds. “I’ll have to give this some thought. Do you have a similar offer for Harry?”

“Not at this time, no.”

“But why?”

Fury turned to face her. “Several reasons, the most important being we don’t know his capabilities, nor do we know how the power boost he had experienced will affect him. There have been more than a few instances of young men suddenly finding a new level of power and their personalities change because of it.”

“Harry will not change.” Hermione scoffed.

“Perhaps not. If he maintains this level of power, he would be a welcome addition to Section W.” Fury paused to watch as Harry and the Agents started another set of exercises.

“When are we returning to Britain?” Hermione asked. “I really need to contact my parents.”

“We’ll be over Lakenheath in about an hour.”

“What?” Hermione asked shocked.

“You didn’t know? Miss Granger, this is the Victory, one of SHIELD’s assault Helicarriers.”