

“Are you sure that’ll work?” Albus asked, staring at Croaker expectantly.

“It’ll work, Dumbledore.” Croaker said firmly.

“I only ask because the last few times were a failure, and I get the feeling Fawkes would be less inclined to spare me his flames.”

The trill from his companion, who was entrapped in a contraption, sounded like a promise of bad things to come if Fawkes was hurt.

“As I told you before, Dumbledore. The last few times, our calculations were way off. We didn’t take into account that the branch reality could be developing a temporal dissonance as it branched away from the main timeline.”

“A temporal dissonance?” Albus asked curiously.

“Mr Potter’s arrival has created a branch reality that occupies a unique space in time, connected to our reality by a common past but at the same time far away from us because of the differences. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.” Albus nodded.

“Then you understand Mr Potter has inadvertently become the focal point of change within this new reality. Every action he takes is creating ripples in space and time. It is affecting other people, and those people are making decisions that deviate from their future selves. These differences or anomalies in the past have created more distance between our reality and the branch reality. Does that make sense?”

“I suspect what you are saying is that as Harry makes more changes in the branch reality, that reality is branching farther away from our reality. So, there is more distance between our reality and the branch reality than, say, last day.”

“Essentially, yes.” Croaker nodded slowly. “But it’s not just Mr Potter. He must’ve affected other people’s lives since his arrival. Those changes are also reverberating across reality, making this branch reality farther away from our own.”

“I see. Does that mean Harry has spent more time in this new branch reality than we experienced?” Albus asked.

“I can’t say for sure. There are no specific laws for space and time. If there was, we didn’t know about it. In my experience, the laws that bind time and space are fluid in nature. They’re always in a state of flux – always unpredictable.” Croaker explained.

“Yet, you claim you can retrieve Harry.” Sirius barged in with a cold stare.

Albus could see the man was apocalyptic and, therefore, chose to keep his silence despite Croaker’s hopeful look.

“How can you retrieve Harry when you don’t even know whether he is in the past or the future?” Sirius asked furiously.

“Do you know what happens when you cast a spell Lord Black? Do you truly know what happens?” Croaker asked.

"I'm not here to get lectured on magic." Sirius thundered. "It has been nearly a month. I want my godson."

"I assure you. Mr Potter will be brought back. We've toiled day and night to make this work, Lord Black. Today, you'll be leaving with Mr Potter from the Ministry."

Sirius growled one last time before walking away while muttering darkly under his breath.

Albus watched Sirius join Damien Greengrass and Minister Bones in a corner of the chamber. Of all the people who had worked strenuously to bring Harry back, Damien Greengrass worked the hardest. The man had not only obtained time turners from beyond Britain but also got expert wizards from across the many wizarding communities of the world.

'That's probably why Minister Bones made Damien Greengrass the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.' Albus thought.

However, he felt there was something driving Lord Greengrass. Albus recognised some of his paranoia stemmed from the Greengrass family's sudden closeness to Harry and Sirius. After Voldemort's fall, he had been responsible for keeping Harry insulated from the unwanted attention of several elements within the wizarding world. Of course, his protection was necessary as Harry was a little child barely able to make coherent sounds on his own. Even if he had let Harry grow up among the Dursleys, it would have been a kinder fate than what would've happened had a wizarding family raised him.

But now, things have changed. He knew Harry was more than capable of taking care of himself. The fight in the Ministry atrium proved Harry was ready to stand against Voldemort and all the challenges that lay ahead. It was his hope that Harry could succeed where he failed and overcome all the odds that were arrayed against him.

Nonetheless, he could not help but worry for Harry. He had once abandoned his family, and Albus has lived with the consequences of that decision till now. He could not do the same to Harry, whose parents died because he failed to destroy Voldemort.

The endless resources that Damien Greengrass was magically pulling into London were concerning.

'It's true the Greengrass family stayed away from the isles during the war. But to amass such connections to not only make different Ministries cooperate but also share their resources...' Albus trailed off in thought.

Shaking his head, Albus put such thoughts at the back of his mind. For now, he focused on getting Harry back safely. His worries went to Harry's condition in the branch reality. From what he had observed so far, the chances of Harry getting into the future were slim. If their current reality were not a branch reality, then the future would remain unknown to everyone. Under such a circumstance, Harry was most likely stranded in the past.

How far in the past was a question that could only be answered by Harry.

But his worry was the time Harry spent on this branch of reality. If too much time had passed in the branch of reality, then Harry might've started a life of his own in the new world he found himself in. It'd be cruel to wrench Harry back from the branch reality. But most importantly, Albus knew Harry would've comparatively a safer and normal life in the branch of reality than in this world.

"Albus. We're ready." Croaker suddenly said, snapping him out of his thoughts.

He kept his concerns in a dark corner of his mind and instead went straight for Fawkes. His trusted phoenix companion was dressed in a small black jacket lined with runes with no beginning or end.

“Are you ready, old friend?”

His trusted phoenix trilled a hopeful note that lifted his spirits.

“I hope everything works as we hope for Harry’s sake and our own.” Albus muttered before taking Fawkes towards Croaker.

Croaker chanted something under his breath and, together with the Unspeakables, both foreign and British, used a spell against the suspended sphere of energy that swallowed Harry into a different reality. The barriers that were keeping the sphere contained flared to life as the sphere rapidly expanded.

Albus could see the wizards straining against the sphere as they manipulated it to suit their needs. Unlike many of the last attempts, this time, the sphere collapsed in on itself to form a whirlpool that began sucking everything inwards.

“Dumbledore! Now’s the time. Remember, it has to be quick. Not a drop of time should be wasted.” Croaker shouted over the whirling sound of the portal opening.

“You know what to do, Fawkes.” Albus said, petting his friend on the head. “Bring Harry home.”

Fawkes bobbed his head before turning himself into a ball of fire. The Unspeakables lifted a portion of the barrier, allowing Fawkes to slip in, and he disappeared into the vortex of space.

“What now?” Sirius asked.

“Now, we wait for Fawkes to return with Harry.” said Albus, looking expectantly at the whirlpool that was ever so slowly expanding.

Albus hoped there were no hiccups and Harry returned safely. If they could not return Harry, then all hope was lost for the wizarding world. There was far too much at stake.

“Company, release!” Pelius shouted at the top of his lungs.

The siege engines lining the cliff released as one, throwing huge round rocks carved with runes courtesy of the goblins. He’d have never imagined the goblins would give up their weapons of war for the benefit of wizards. But impossible things tended to happen under the reign of his king, Hadrian Targaryen, the first of his name, King of Scotland.

Hundreds of rune-enforced boulders fell on the ships from the kingdom of Bernicia. The stones began exploding with terrifying power once they fell on the unsuspecting enemy ships. Planks of wood splintered away as ships were blown to three or more pieces under their assault.

“Arm the catapults!” he shouted.

He could hear the screams coming from the shoreline as the men of Bernicia faced their worst defeats in the sea. Pelius could sense the desperation and fear of his enemies. It was only natural for

them to feel this way. His king had spread fear in their home islands as his armies marched in all directions, expanding the newly formed Scottish kingdom. Constantine's defeat at the Battle of the Dragon, as it was called, was the deciding moment when the Kingdom of Alba was done away, and in its place, the Kingdom of Scotland emerged. All across the countryside, dragon banners rose within a month as King Hadrian enforced his control by turning his kingdom into an impenetrable fortress. No one could enter or leave the Kingdom of Scotland without the king's permission.

The following year, the army of Scotland gathered to invade Dalriada. With the former army of Constantine under King Hadrian's control, the fall of the many tribes in Dalriada was almost inevitable. Despite being the centre of Christian expansionism, Dalriada was rife with factionalism between different tribes and the chieftains that led these tribes, like in the old days. But the main reason his king attacked Dalriada instead of Moray or Strathclyde was to gain access to the vast naval fleet in the region. With the entire region of Dalriada assimilating into the Kingdom of Scotland, they now had access to the North Channel and possessed a large fleet of ships.

The rapid expansion of the kingdom had spooked the surrounding kings of Moray, Strathclyde and Lothian. An invasion attempt from the highlands was expected by the king by the spies in Bernicia. But what surprised them was a naval invasion from their enemies supported by the Vikings. For years, his king had tried to court Vikings as allies, but they had joined with the enemy.

Pelius was relieved the Vikings had joined the enemy. He was not fond of muggles, and the less of their kind in the kingdom, the better it was in his mind. Looking at the screaming men desperately trying to land their row boats, Pelius could only scoff in derision.

'Where did the vaunted ferociousness of the Vikings go?'

"Company, release!"

Another volley of boulders took flight from the cliff, bombarding the Vikings and Bernician army. The siege weapons of goblins were terrifying, and Pelius was relieved the goblin army was on their side instead of fighting against wizards. He didn't know what his king did to earn the allegiance of the goblins, but there were rumours of a single combat between King Hadrian and Snipshank. Whatever the case, goblin weapons were highly effective in combating muggle armies. This is why the goblin army was deployed along the Scottish kingdom's borders to destroy Bernicia's invading army.

Pelius oversaw a few more volleys, wreaking havoc on the enemy fleet. The muggles could not properly execute their amphibian assault because his king knew their landing site beforehand. The few that landed on the beach were unlucky, and his thoughts were proven correct when a huge cavalry force rode into the beach with dragon banners in hand. The screams from the muggles and the clash of steel filled the morning sky.

He ordered the assault to stop as the king's army was now pushing the enemy into the sea. The battle at the beach quickly turned into a one-sided slaughter. Even if the Vikings were ferocious fighters, they were outnumbered ten to one. Those were odds that even the best of armies could not easily overcome with the sea at their back.

Pelius' attention shifted to the surviving ships in the enemy fleet. They were not even attempting to rescue their stranded brethren. Seeing the losing fight, the ships turned away from the disastrous battle to flee and survive the day.

A guttural roar came from the north, making Pelius and his men look back. From the clouds, a giant red dragon glided through the air towards them. His men began hollering the king's name to the

heavens as King Hadrian, atop his draconic mount, passed by the cliff at great speed and dived down the edge of the cliff. Pelius doubted he was the only one to feel a surge of glee and satisfaction as his king swept away the remnants of the enemy fleet on his dragon. The men under his command screamed and shouted in jubilation as the king's dragon breathed out a long line of fire that broke several ships trying to make their escape.

For someone who had only known the taste of helplessness and defeat, the string of victories under his king tasted like the sweet wine of Hogsmeade. Pelius hoped it was a taste that'd never leave his tongue.

Harry scoffed as the muggles in the enemy ships tried to bring down his dragon using their archers. Steel-tipped arrows only bounced off harmlessly against the magically protected hide of the Red Queen. His dragon opened her maw wide and breathed dragon fire upon the ship that dared to attack her. The screams of men and the smell of burnt flesh and wood were kept at bay from his nostrils by the bubblehead charm.

But that didn't prevent his dragon from inhaling the smoke and the scent. Letting out an unhappy growl, the Red Queen flapped her wings and put some distance between her and the ship she was intent on destroying. She breathed out another globe of fire at the ship as it started to come undone at the seams. The ship broke by its centre as wood burned away under the intense heat of dragon fire. Water began rushing into the ship, dragging it ever so slowly underneath the sea.

Harry's attention was taken away from the sinking ship when an arrow was stopped by his magical shield. The red cloak he had on his back flared up with runes once again, producing a shield of energy that stopped more arrows. He found the culprits on a rowboat busily arming themselves with more arrows when they realised their first salvo was ineffective. Going by their attire and the colour of their hair, Harry assumed the men were Vikings.

Harry snorted when the Viking archers tried their luck once again by shooting arrows at him. The Celtic runes woven into his cloak flared to life again, making the arrows bounce off harmlessly against an energy barrier.

'No muggle weapon in existence could bypass the protections enchanted by my wife.' Harry thought as he took careful aim with his wand.

"Bombarda Maxima."

The rowboat was blown to bits, as were the soldiers who didn't have the presence of mind to jump from the boat when he cast the spell. He began to similarly destroy any stray ships or boats that were trying to escape the trap he had set for them. The flames of the Red Queen burned and set the sea alight, turning the small pocket of the sea into a burning oven for his enemies. Many of his enemies begged for mercy, but Harry had none to spare. He had graciously offered the Viking raiders a peace deal that would've allowed them to keep the highlands of Moray and Ireland. He had offered them an alliance of equal partners and preference in maritime trade, but they had spurned his generous offer to side with Bernicia to attack his lands unprovoked.

He could've understood if the Vikings had disregarded his offer of alliance as he was new to kingship and the Kingdom of Scotland was newly formed. But to attack his lands when he extended them the hand of friendship...

'Well, there is only one thing left to do. A total purge of the Vikings from all the islands and even Ireland.' Harry vowed.

The war didn't end at the sea. There was a host of Bernician soldiers trying to invade his lands, but magic kept them at bay, and then he unleashed the goblin army on them along with some wizards. It was a one-sided slaughter that decimated the Bernician army and opened up the Scottish lowlands for further invasion by his army. When Harry marched his army into the lowlands, he faced little resistance. One by one, villages, towns and castles fell under his control. He took the church officials, lords and knights as his prisoners and wiped their minds clean. The churches were either converted into temples of learning or soup kitchens for the children.

The former church officials were tasked with increasing literacy rates by functioning as educators and surveyors for the crown. They were also charged with undoing Rome's hold on the populace. Harry had seriously contemplated the introduction of a new religion to replace the old one, but he left that idea on the back burner as he was not entirely sure what could replace the existing Christianity and whether it'd be of benefit to the people.

Bernicia eventually came under his control when the Bernician king was captured by his soldiers before the man could escape to Strathclyde. There were disgruntled and wary eyes in Strathclyde that Harry was not prepared to address at the moment, so the capture of King Malcolm of Bernicia was a boon in his eyes. With the capture of King Malcolm, his campaign in Lothlan came to a close. The complete subjugation of Lothlan was unfinished, as the purge of church infrastructure and doctrine was incomplete. But that was a time-consuming process, and Harry left some of the work to his apprentices and the royal army. His army would go around the newly conquered area, imprisoning church officials and having them transported to the capital of Scotland to get brainwashed. All it took was a memory charm and some memory modifications to get the former church officials to become loyal servants of the Scottish crown.

After the fall of Bernicia, Harry was forced to spend some time in the newly conquered land to ensure Strathclyde did not develop any ideas to invade his lands. To that effect, he erected muggle-repelling wards that blocked major passes that'd facilitate army movements to be on the safe side. He preferred to act against Strathclyde as soon as possible and gobble up the kingdom into his expanding Scottish polity. But Harry was forced to reevaluate his strategy now that he knew he had to contend with the Vikings. There was a need for a strong fleet on the North Channel and the North Sea. It was not imperative to strike at Viking positions in Ireland and have them dislodged from their entrenched positions.

Harry was starting to see the danger of weakening the Christian kings too much if the Vikings were hostile to the Kingdom of Scotland.

'This'll need to be discussed in the Wizengamot.' Harry mused.

It was with such thoughts that he returned to his capital city of Valyria. There was a celebration going on when he entered the city walls. The celebration of Scotland's victory over Lothian was indeed an occasion for great revelry. The captured former king was also paraded through the city's paved streets, but of course, the former monarch was welcomed into the city with dignity. There was a

ceremony where Malcolm had to voluntarily submit to the crown and accept subservience to the Scottish crown.

But all those ceremonies or the politics of the kingdom fled his mind as Harry entered his castle.

A bright smile overtook his face as his wife, and son waited for him near the doorway of his throne room.

“Rowena. Alexander.”

Harry pressed a chaste kiss on his wife’s lips and another on his son’s forehead.

“Make sure I’m not disturbed for the remainder of the day.” Harry ordered his advisors and servants.

For the remainder of the day, he spent his precious time mostly entertaining his son and sharing some intimate moments with his wife of two years. The entire day he spent with his family as he had missed the warmth of his wife and the joy of holding his son in his arms. When night came, Harry slept peacefully in bed with Rowena in his arms.

The next day, Harry was greeted by dark clouds in the sky. At first, he thought the sky would clear itself once it rained. But the sky remained filled with dark clouds and fierce winds while rain eluded them. He got the distinct feeling that the rain was waiting to pour on them to disturb the ceremony.

When it was time for the ceremony to begin, arcs of lightning started dancing in the sky. Fearing a fierce storm was brewing, he ordered the ceremony to speed up. The former king of Bernicia was forced to kneel before Harry’s throne and offer his crown and sword. After giving an oath of allegiance to the Scottish crown, Malcolm was allowed to leave Valyria for his home.

When Harry, along with his court, came outside the castle to see the departure of the former king of Bernicia, the storm that was brewing in the sky took a turn for the worse. A giant vortex started to form in the sky, surrounded by dark storm clouds that made everyone uneasy. The clouds gathered around the vortex as if shielding it from something.

“Rowena, take Alex inside.” said Harry.

“What is it?” Rowena asked worriedly.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s a Thunderbird.” Harry said, but he doubted that was the case.

Suddenly, a whooshing sound reverberated across the land as the vortex in the sky suddenly became pale white and started emitting rainbow colours.

‘Yeah, definitely not a thunderbird.’ Harry thought.

He took his wand into his hand, ready to face whatever was brewing in the sky.

To Harry’s surprise, the whooshing sound stopped abruptly, and a phoenix song filled the air.

“What the hell?” Harry’s eyes widened as he saw a familiar phoenix exit the vortex in space.

The soldiers around him unsheathed their weapons while the wizards produced their wands and staff, but Harry stopped them from acting against the phoenix as it flew towards him. Instead, Harry offered his arm for the bird to land.

“Fawkes.” Harry breathed in surprise once the phoenix landed on his offered arm.

The flaming bird let out a trill that sounded like a happy greeting to Harry’s ears.

"I don't understand. How did you come here?" Harry breathed out in amazement.

Fawkes shook his head before he climbed onto his shoulder and rubbed his head against his cheek.

"Harry?" Rowena called him cautiously.

"It's alright. Fawkes is a friend from home." Harry said, smiling at his wife.

The air around him suddenly simmered, making Harry's eyes widen. Bright gold flames started to cover him like a cocoon, making Harry look in panic at Fawkes.

"No! Stop Fawkes!" Harry shouted, but his attempts to dissuade Fawkes from teleporting fell on deaf ears.

The golden aura completely encompassed him, and in the next moment, he felt like he was being squeezed through a small tube at breakneck speed. His body felt like it was being melted off, and his ears could only make out a high-pitched scream. Harry had to shut his eyes as he could see an explosion of colours that threatened to make him blind. He didn't know how long he was subjected to the assault on his senses, but when it finally ended, he was on his stomach on a smooth marble floor.

"Harry!"

"Harry, my boy!"

"You're safe, lad. Up now."

Different voices bared down on him, but he could not discern who was talking or where he was. His eyes were out of focus, and he could only see dark spots in his vision. His legs gave out, and Harry fell, allowing darkness to claim him.