

There's Always a Way Who you gonna call...?

There's always a way.

That's been the motto of my entire professional career. Well, the second one.

I graduated with top marks from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Magic. Only people in the program actually got to learn the full name of the school. It was just the right sort of inside joke for a wizarding academy run by people who still wore pocket protectors. My next few years were at Quantico, training with the Feds. I was looking forward to a long career in government service when a thoroughly botched operation dropped into my lap. I salvaged the situation with a minimum of bloodshed, only to discover later that the whole thing had been a set up. I was *supposed* to blow it and die in the aftermath. When I succeeded a little better than I was expected to, I suddenly became a liability to my organization.

My job had some really nice perks, but a retirement plan was not one of them.

To make a long story short, I did a little E&E (that's Escape and Evade for those of you outside the trade) and found a small island to hang out on. After perfecting my tan and abusing my liver, I figured the heat had died down enough to test the waters at home. Turns out I'd stayed away long enough that my former employers either assumed I'd died (ha!) or figured out that if I'd stayed quiet this long, it was better to let the sleeping dog lie.

There are not a lot of things someone with my professional background is good for. Well, I suppose I could play Quodpot professionally, but that not exactly healthy for someone trying to maintain a low profile. Around this time, one of my old contacts asked me if I'd be willing to help him with a problem. The 'little problem' turned out to be his daughter's ex-boyfriend and his little coven of necromancers. Two weeks and thirteen body-bags later, I was noticeably wealthier. This was especially true after I re-negotiated my contract when the situation became clearer.

After that I became what I call a 'freelancer'. 'Freelance what?' is the common response, to which I answer 'freelance anything'. Actually, there are a few things I won't do. They aren't many, but I prefer being able to sleep nights. In time, I acquired a bit of a reputation I suppose. People began to seek me out of the really touchy jobs. Nobody asked me to do the kinds of things I didn't want to do.

I even occasionally got contacted by people in other countries. Sometimes foreign governments, sometimes private groups. Sometimes it was hard to tell. One time I got tapped to track down this wizard who'd outrun an arrest warrant in Great Britain. My contact person was a British agent, they call them 'aurors' on the odd side of the pond. When I checked her out though, I found out she was officially on holiday. So either her bosses were keeping the job **very** black, or she was doing this for someone else. I didn't really care. She was a nice girl to talk to, but very clumsy. Of course, you don't have to be incredibly stealthy when you are a natural metamorphagus. I'm not sure I would have picked up on that if her facial features hadn't been slightly mis-matched between meetings. In my line of work, it pays to have a good memory for details. As it was, I nearly hexed her when I smelled a rat.

'Tonks' or whatever her real name was, said she'd keep me in mind if they needed my help again. Given what I'd heard about a shadow war starting to heat up in Jolly Olde England, I thought I might.

Surprisingly enough, I didn't hear from her for a couple of years. I took an extended tour of Southeast Asia, working on rolling up a black lotus ring. In the end, nine months of careful investigation culminated in three weeks of nearly constant warfare. In the end, I wound up with more money than I knew what to do with, a few new toys, and a knee that took fourteen months of physical therapy and magic healing to restore to full function.

While I was convalescing, I caught up on the news. England was really heating up. Some necro who kicked it back in the eighties had reportedly returned from the dead. People were disappearing daily, and even the mundane civilians were getting victimized. Someone even capped the national head of Magical Law Enforcement. The whole mess culminated in a civil uprising when this Voldemort character and his crew tried to take over Hogwarts, England's primary Wizarding school. Casualties were said to be pretty heavy, but in the end, the scariest Englishman since Keith Richards got wasted by a seventh-year student named Harry Potter.

Reading that almost made me laugh out loud. I suppose there's a lesson to be learned in that, but reading the list of the dead sapped any irony from the situation. The headmaster and half the staff were killed in the battle, along with many of the students. Between damage to the school, and injured students, they just cancelled the rest of the school year and new headmistress invited them all back to repeat the year.

And I thought I went to a rough school.

Around the time my knee was up to long distance running again, the Brits were trying to rebuild what got demolished in the war. While this was going on, a study came out about their birthrate and recent demographic trends.

Now, Brits are nice people, but they are still hung up on that nineteenth century class distinction crap. Only they do it with blood. Full-blood, half-blood, mud-blood, the whole mess. Now I'm not saying that Americans are any better on some issues, but we at least managed to dodge that one. We'll marry/sleep with/ shack up with anything that looks good and doesn't drive us mad. Seems they are a little pickier over there, and their pureblooded families got so inbred that they started losing their magic, and producing what they call squibs over there. I think 'latent' is a nicer word

for it. I mean, they can still use potions and port-keys and such, it's not like the end of the world.

Anyway, someone in their government saw that study and had themselves a full blown panic attack. Screaming about the 'end of English Wizarding', their Minister of Magic pushed through this Marriage Law Act. Basically, it says that any unwed pureblood, half-blood, or muggle-born over the age of sixteen will be contacted by the ministry and assigned an appropriate partner of the opposite type. This forcible mixing of pureblood with the muggle-born and half-bloods is supposed to increase the number of magically active children born. The pairings are to be decided based on blood tests and complex divination spells.

Well, you can imagine the excrement striking the rotary oscillator after that.

The British Minister of Magic, a hard-case named Scrimgeour, was assassinated in the week before the now-famous Battle of Hogwarts. The current chair-warmer was the previous Minister, one Cornelius Fudge. Fudge evidently got the job either because he'd done it before, he had enough dirt on the surviving members of the Wizengamot, or some combination of the two. Fudge took the emergency powers the Wizengamot granted to his predecessor and used them ruthlessly. No unmarried British citizen of age was allowed to emigrate or leave the country. The parents of some muggle-born witches who'd gotten them on a plane were rounded up on conspiracy charges and sent to Azkaban.

I'm proud to say that while the European ministries cooperated with the British, the U.S. not-so-politely told them to stick it. None of our politicians were stupid enough to hack off half the voting population, proving that there is a point to all the election hassle every four years. We closed our embassies once it became clear that Fudge meant to include every witch and wizard living on British soil. Anyone who could even fake an English accent was getting a free ride at Ellis Island (it was still used by our Bureau of Magic).

I was reading another article about this growing Charlie Foxtrot when I got the call. I put down the article I was reading. There had been some sort of confrontation at Hogwarts, which had just reopened for the Fall term, and Headmistress McGonagall was reportedly taken into custody. "Riley's electronic repair, Riley speaking," I said into the telephone.

"Mister Riley, I seem to be having some trouble with my radio." The voice sounded vaguely familiar.

"What kind of radio is it?"

"I don't know it's quite old. It appears to have vacuum tubes."

"Okay, I can come by and take a look at it."

"I'll bring it by Louie's on ninth and sycamore."

"I'll be there."

I was sitting in a corner booth when a moderately attractive woman I didn't recognize tripped and stumbled as she tried to slide into the opposite bench. "Tonks?" I asked, remembering where I'd heard that accent on the phone before.

After a short negotiation I agreed to talk to her boss. I went back to my apartment and packed a large suitcase with a lot of things that weren't clothes. An unregistered port-key brought me to a quaint-looking English village.

I stared at Tonks as my stomach settled. "If we went as far as I think we did, that was one hell of a port-key."

She grimaced. "It was. He's... pretty strong." She turned and led me through the village and up the path to the castle. I remembered some pictures from the newspaper after the battle. It was hard to believe this was the same place. As we passed the gate, I noticed the tell-tale ripple of an invisibility cloak coming up behind me.

I popped my wand out of the wrist holster and stunned the guy behind us, all in one motion. Two more appeared behind Tonks and I stunned one while she kicked the other in the solar plexus, dropping him like a stone. I stunned him anyway.

We both decided to hustle at that point. I hauled my suitcase up onto my shoulder and actually outran Tonks to the school entrance. No one bothered us once I felt us pass the wards though. Tonks led me through the school and I could feel the tension in the place. Most of the older students looked pale and drawn, and many of the girls' eyes were red from crying.

Once we got up to the fourth floor, Tonks led me to a statue of a Gargoyle that swung open after she said "Tartan". She stumbled to a stop as she saw the office was occupied. "Professor McGonagall, I heard you'd been—"

The severe-looking woman behind the desk just waved her fingers. "As I was telling Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, and Mr. and Ms. Weasley, the Minister cannot have me arrested simply for public disagreement with his policies. At least not yet. Albus left us at least that many friends in the Wizengamot," she concluded sadly. "Anyway," she continued straightening even more in her seat. "Is this the young man Mr. Potter said he'd asked you to contact?"

Tonks swallowed. "Yes, ma'am. When you were arrested, we didn't think we had much choice."

While they were talking I looked at the other people in the room. A tall, red-headed man with scars on his forearms and one cheek sat in one of the guest chairs, leaning forward in his seat and bouncing his feet in agitation. Holding his hand was a medium-sized woman with bushy brown hair. The other pair of chairs was occupied as well. One held a slender girl with shoulder-length red hair. The other held a skinny guy with messy black hair and green eyes. While he still had the scar on his forehead, it was no longer his most distinguishing mark. Through his open robes, I could see that his right leg had about half the muscle of his left, and he wore a complex knee brace over his shorts. A sturdy metal cane rested against his chair. Given my recent experiences, I could pick out the scars from massive reconstructive surgery amidst the knots of scar tissue. His jaw was tight

and I could see a muscle ticking along the edge of it as the red-headed girl held and slowly rubbed her thumb along the back of it.

“Mr. Potter, I don't think this is a wise course of action,” McGonagall finally said.

He glared at her for a moment before speaking. “What choice do we have?”

“There are still legal appeals that can be made. The Wizengamot-“

“Has always been for sale to anyone with enough galleons, Professor,” he said softly. “Where were most of the aurors when we were attacked here? No, I'm not taking any more chances. Not with Ginny, not with anyone.”

The girl holding his hand shuddered and I could see her shoulders twitch a little as she kept her face stony.

“Why don't you tell me what is happening, and what you'd like to see happening?” I asked quietly.

I been doing a lot of things in a lot of places, but when that... that kid, turned those eyes on me I shuddered. I've read about combat veterans who get that “hundred yard stare”... well this, this teenager had a “hundred mile stare”. He looked like he'd been through more hell, more pain, and more danger than anyone should have to put up with. “We got the list of people who are being forced to marry... and who they are marrying.” He looked sick and the girls just shuddered.

He took a deep breath and continued in a stronger voice, his anger adding heat to his words. “They've targeted every non-pureblood female student over the age of fifteen. Almost all of them have been paired with men twice their age or more, or with men we know were supporters of Voldemort. Many of the male students are being forced to marry into established pureblood families as well.”

“Do they have any options as far as people they'd rather marry?” I nodded toward the girl holding his hand.

Potter shook his head angrily. “The ministry ‘discovered’ evidence showing that her mother's mother was a muggle, so she has to marry a pureblood now. It's a blatant fabrication, but we can't prove it yet.”

“Barring that,” the headmistress said in a disgusted tone, “the Ministry is disallowing substitutions on the basis that their ‘fitness and compatibility tests’ will determine the best match for improving the blood lines.”

“So basically, they have just enslaved all of you. Why the hell isn't there some kind of general revolt? I've seen plenty of governments fall for less reason.” I don't like getting emotional where work is involved, but I was starting to get sick to my stomach.

“In the English Wizarding world,” McGonagall said in a tired voice, “approximately ninety percent of the wealth is controlled by the major pureblood families, who constitute less than one percent of the population. Most of the people with power in this society are benefiting from this law. There are... indications... that the Ministry is letting people select partners for the right price. Many of the rest are already married or unaffected for some reason. As things stand right now, four-fifths of the pairings the ministry has ordered involve Hogwarts students. At this rate the fifth, sixth, and seventh year classes will be decimated.”

Harry Potter spoke up again, his voice laced with bitterness. “I'm not in any condition to fight this,” he looked down at his leg. “But I do have a lot of galleons. Tonks says you specialize in troubleshooting. Well, we've got trouble. After everything that happened, I'm... not... going to let this just happen.”

The red-haired girl spoke again, her voice barely above a whisper. “I'll take poison before I marry that bastard Malfoy.” I could hear gasps from everyone in the room except Harry. He just tightened his grip on her hand, like he never wanted to let go. I wondered how much damage he would do if he went Dark from this.

“Tell you what,” I said cheerfully, “I think I can come up with a better use for that poison.”

It wasn't often that someone in my line of work finds a job that is lucrative, on the side of love and freedom, and gives one the opportunity to murder a lot of people that desperately need killing.

It took a few days to get set up, which put some pressure on us, because the first of the marriages was required to be performed in little more than a week. Harry was true to his word, and we spent an obscene amount of money in this place called Knockturn Alley on special equipment. His goblin friends at Gringotts also helped us with a few really difficult to acquire items.

Narcissa Malfoy came down with a bad case of ‘dead’, shortly after Voldemort's fall... right before the ministry discovered ‘secret evidence’ showing that Lucius Malfoy had actually been under the imperius curse during the entire course of the second Voldemort uprising. You'd think they would come up with something more original after a while. It was quite a coincidence that the first two marriage decrees to be published paired up Lucius with Hermione Granger, and his son Draco with Ginevra Weasley. When I went over the list of announcements, it was quite clear that the ministry was targeting directly or indirectly everyone that had played a role in the last war. I already knew from the short time I'd known him that taking Ginny away from him would kill Harry, ditto for taking Hermione away from Ron. I don't imagine either girl would survive long at Malfoy manor, either. I remember being that young once, but I never had to put up with the things they did... things that, for better or worse, change you. Gloomy as they were, they were still good kids though.

You'd think that people who spent as much money as the Malfoys did on that house, would at least have purchased better wards. They didn't even have any bodyguards. Maybe they were concerned about witnesses for whatever sickness they got up to when they were out of the public eye. Anyway, I took enough time with Lucius to confirm that the whole Marriage Law was his idea, as a way to re-enslave the muggles and muggleborns they had to deal with. Getting revenge on Potter and the Weasleys was just icing on the cake. Since I pretty much knew everything I needed to know, I simply force-fed Ginny's vial of poison to Draco. With their masters dead and the family line ended, their house-elves were free to scatter to

the four winds. (I noticed later that a few new arrivals at Hogwarts tended to give me a wide berth after that.) I lit a few strategically-placed fires and apparated out when the ward-stone cracked and shattered.

Half an hour later, I was back in McGonagall's office. The smile of Ginny's face when I handed her the empty vial made the whole thing worth it. She squealed, hugged me hard enough to knock the wind out of me, and then grabbed Harry's ears, kissing him thoroughly.

Of course, the Ministry sent aurors to Hogwarts the next day. Fortunately, about thirty people were with Harry in the Gryffindor common room when the Malfoys died in a tragic house fire, and I wasn't around when they visited.

Over the next several weeks, I worked my way down the list, executing unwanted suitors. During one of my reports, Ronald mentioned that almost everyone at Hogwarts had subscribed to the Daily Prophet, and was cheering on whoever was doing it. I noticed something else as I walked around under the new invisibility cloak I'd purchased. The quiet terror was slowly being replaced by relief and a sense of hope.

I never expected that conducting a campaign of organized terrorism would be so morally uplifting.

Eventually, even the thickest and most arrogant purebloods took the hint and withdrew from the proposed marriages. I continued working my way down the list, paying a visit to anyone who still tried to press the issue.

Finally Fudge stopped listening to his security advisors and made a public speech. He ranted about the 'new dark menace endangering them all' in front of a crowd of supporters in Diagon Alley. My enchanted crossbow bolt punched through his shield charm and buried itself in his left eye socket. Magical healing or not, brain injuries were almost impossible to fix. The explosive warhead that detonated a moment later made the whole question academic as I port-keyed away.

Epilogue

It was nice of them to invite me to the double wedding. I was honestly a little surprised. My employers usually didn't want to think about me too much after I'd done whatever they needed me to do. I suppose, in a way, this ceremony at The Burrow was the final objective of what I'd been hired to do.

With Fudge gone, Arthur Weasley was quickly elected on the promise to repeal the Marriage Laws. The original study was being re-examined for errors, but even if it was valid, Hermione Granger suggested over a score of different incentives and tax breaks that the government could use to encourage the births of more wizarding children.

Harry found me in the garden, watching the gnomes play in the dirt. He could walk for short periods of time without the cane now. I told him about my knee problems, and how long it had taken to get back to one hundred percent, which made him sigh.

"I suppose I'll just have to keep working at it if I want to play Quidditch."

I laughed. "Doesn't hardly seem like much of a game if the balls don't explode," I said, which got me a rude look.

"Don't let Ron hear you say that."

We were quiet for a minute.

"I want to thank you for what you did," he said quietly.

I shrugged. "You just hired me to do something you couldn't do for yourself at the time. It's not a big deal."

"It is to me. If you ever need anything..."

I smiled at him. "My contract was more than generous, but I appreciate the sentiment. Tonks knows how to get hold of me, if you really need me again. It's probably best that I leave after you get hitched."

Harry looked at me, a little puzzled.

I took a long breath and blew it out. "What Fudge did was horrible. He backed you into a corner while you were hurt and tried to take everything from you and the people you love. You were fully justified in doing whatever it took to stop him. Calling on me, or someone like me, is not something you want to do lightly. It can start to get more and more convenient, and that is a road you don't want to go down."

I half-expected him to get offended and throw me out. Shows how much I knew.

He cracked the first genuine smile I'd seen him make. It seemed to take ten years off his face. He stuck out his hand and we shook. I followed him back inside as the mother of his bride called his name.