The Hearthkeepers' Symposium

Somewhere between worlds, in a club that existed only when needed, and only after hours…

The room was warm and dim, its polished wood and deep armchairs lit by pools of lamplight. Alfred Pennyworth sat with his usual immaculate posture, one hand steady on a cup of perfectly brewed tea. Nearby, Chief Master Sergeant Walter Harriman, for once in mufti, leaned back with the casual vigilance of a man who had lived too many years in command rooms, his battered mug resting easy in his hand. Captain Gilad Pellaeon reclined in a leather wingback, letting the golden light catch in a snifter of Corellian brandy. His uniform was as crisp and unyielding as the man himself, save for the collar clasp being undone.

At Alfred's feet sat Gromit, unassuming in manner but keen-eyed. He was not merely reading the club newsletter; instead, he worked methodically through a thick volume entitled *The Fifty Most Difficult Crossword Puzzles of All Time*. His pencil moved with the clean precision of a master swordsman, each answer written in without hesitation. He listened to the conversation above without missing a word, even as he completed the formidable puzzles one after another. By the time the others had finished a round of war stories, he filled in the final square of puzzle forty-seven and, without fanfare, turned to forty-eight.

Noticing the book in Gromit's paws, Pellaeon raised an eyebrow. "You're on forty-eight already? I'm only on thirty-one."

Harriman lifted a hand sheepishly. "Twenty-six here. And I've been staring at that twelve-letter clue for 'polytropic equilibrium' for… well, far too long."

Alfred adjusted his cuffs. "Thirty. And only so far owing to interruptions. Escaped crocodiles are not conducive to concentration—and Master Bruce fails to appreciate the intellectual benefits of crossword puzzles."

They exchanged looks of amusement, tinged with modesty. Gromit shrugged minutely and kept working.

The talk drifted back to their peculiar lines of work. Harriman told of midnight alarms and a near-lockdown caused by a Tok'ra diplomat who had misremembered their own access code—and, in the same breath, O'Neill's penchant for hiding pie in the ventilation shafts. Alfred described running rescue-and-repair operations in Wayne Manor with one hand while refitting Batman's grapnel with the other. Pellaeon recalled the week-long search for a priceless holocron, only to discover it pressed into service as a cleaning droid's doorstop.

"The greater the stakes," Alfred observed, "the more the universe tests our skill for managing logistics. A hero may command the battlefield, but if their socks are missing, morale plummets."

Harriman grinned. "Amen to that. And heroes always ignore procedure to save the world. Someone has to clean up the messes."

Pellaeon nodded slowly. "There's a special skill in quietly mending the cracks left behind by visionaries. One must anticipate every variable—technical, tactical, and emotional."

From there, the discussion deepened. "Sometimes," Alfred said, "our greatest service is to remind our charges that despair is a luxury they cannot afford. Stand straight, look them in the eye, and say, 'Buck up, sir; you have a world to save.' They may scowl, but they always go back."

"I've told a Grand Admiral near collapse," Pellaeon added, "'Galactic destiny won't shape itself, sir. The fleet awaits your command.' The right words, in the right moment, can shift the course of history."

"And sometimes," Harriman said, "it's just, 'They're counting on you, sir,' repeated three or four times while the klaxons scream."

At that, Gromit quietly finished puzzle forty-eight, tore the immaculate page from the book, and laid it in the center of the table beside a small, much-polished medal for bravery. The engraving was faint but legible: *To my best friend—Thank you for everything.* It was a modest gesture, but heavy with meaning—dedication, perseverance, and the rare honour of recognition honestly earned.

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Alfred, his voice softer than before, said, "Applause may be rare, but a heartfelt thank you warms the heart more than any parade could."

Pellaeon studied the medal for a long moment. "The galaxy seldom sees the hands that hold the helm steady, but when appreciation is sincere, it is a treasure against a lifetime of storms."

Harriman smiled across the table at the beagle. "Sometimes, all it takes is one honest thank you—or the privilege of finishing an impossible puzzle—to remind you it all mattered."

Gromit's tail flicked once in quiet contentment as he tucked both the page and the medal away.

Alfred raised his cup. "To rare recognition—and to knowing, even for a moment, that our work was truly seen."

Their cups and glasses rose together. For an instant the heat of the club's hearth seemed to reach out and embrace them all, binding them in mutual respect. The moment passed, but the warmth remained.

"Let them have their moment in the sun," Pellaeon said. "We know where the switches are, and where the shadows fall darkest."

"And we keep the lights on—quite literally," Harriman agreed.

"To the true defenders of the hearth," Alfred murmured. "May our charges never know how often disaster is averted by tea, coffee, and…" he turned to Gromit, "…quiet competence with a mop and a wrench in the next room." Gromit looked up and nodded in appreciation.

And somewhere—across every world, in every age—the universe was saved again, one perfectly placed word, one quietly mended thread at a time.