

Harry Potter: Pandora's Box

Chapters 23-28

By Novus Peregrine

Disclaimer: Obviously, I'm not J.K. Rowling! I don't own Harry Potter! Though the Pandora character is all mine. Mwhahahaha?

Chapter 23: Unexpected Developments

-September 2nd-

Harry stared in complete bemusement at the quartet of businesses in the courtyard, not far from where the Hogwarts Theaters were set up. In fact, this particular 'courtyard' had once been more 'outdoor training yard' for the same set of traditional weapons that had originally been taught in the rooms the Theaters had taken over. Now, the little-used area had been refurbished into a series of shops using the same space. Well, partially using it, at least. There was clear and obvious room for expansion, with a few empty 'shops' alongside the new businesses.

The trip yesterday on the Hogwarts Express had been uneventful, yet also far more pleasant than his first journey last year, with various of his friends and acquaintances coming and going. It had been from Blaize and Daphne that he'd first gotten hints of what he was now seeing, though the complete reveal, for both him and the rest of the student population, hadn't come until after the sorting. To everyone's complete surprise, the Start of Term announcements had included *several* major changes.

The first was the reveal of 'Lady Hogwarts' herself, the castle's intelligence having apparently copied something like Pandora's Sprite Form, only writ quite a bit larger. The cheery, *living castle*, could now move about and interact with the students personally as a 5'5" projection of an adorably cheery girl in her late teens. Students had been warned not to bother her, as she was still 'getting used to things.' To Harry and Pandora, that clearly spelled that she wasn't entirely over being a bit flighty, and might just wander off mid conversation or forget she was in her 'Avatar' form, as Dumbledore had called it. Hopefully, she didn't cause *too* much trouble, given how chaotic Pandora had described her as being.

The second announcement had been utterly tame in comparison, though of interest to Harry personally, as Remus Lupin had been introduced as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. He certainly wanted to talk with the man, though for the student body as a whole the bolder claim had been Dumbledore explicitly stating that the curse on the Defense position had finally been located and eliminated. Meaning, in theory, that Professor Lupin might actually last more than a year. Harry suspected that it might well have something to do with Hogwarts being properly aware enough now and in contact with the headmaster. That, or perhaps the security review had turned up something. While Harry thought it might be at least possible it was true as a

result of either, most of the students seemed to be more fatalistic about the chances of the claim amounting to anything.

The *final* major announcement had been more attention grabbing to the average student, as Dumbledore had announced the new presence of the very shops Harry was now staring at. One, the closest to the nearby theaters, had been put together by the *incredibly unlikely* quartet of Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass and the Weasley Twins. It had, apparently, been the first of the four and was staff-sponsored by *Flitwick*, of all people. It was, much to his mix of mild annoyance and incredulity, a *souvenir shop* which was selling merchandise related to the various movies that the theaters had shown so far.

According to Blaise and Daphne, the idea had come about when the Weasley Twins had somehow overheard the pair of Slytherins brainstorming on the topic of what sort of business *they* could create at Hogwarts. As heirs to wealthy families, neither of them needed money, but both had been enthused by the idea of using such a thing as proof for their families that they were the right people to remain heirs. Blaise apparently had competition from various cousins, while Daphne was facing a slight uphill battle against the idea of taking a husband that would be the new head of the Greengrass business ventures.

Sexism actually wasn't nearly as strong in the wizarding world as the muggle one, but older families were still *slightly* traditional due to bloodlines and names normally passing through the male line. Without a male Greengrass in Daphne's generation, she was currently the heir by default, but would need to prove she could handle it in ways a male heir wouldn't have been expected to. It was entirely doable, though. Merely a matter of actually getting down to the proving part, rather than being the major hurdle to overcome it might have been in the more traditional parts of the muggle world. Daphne was also, as it happened, one of Flitwick's favorites, being an absolute genius at charms. Which explained, in retrospect, how she'd pulled off animating people's clothes as a first year.

That explained Flitwick sponsoring the whole thing. At least halfway. The other half was the Weasley Twins proving to be nearly as good at charms and *very* good at coming up with business ideas. They didn't have the technical know-how on the business side, or the reputation with the teachers to be taken seriously. What they *had* instantly had was the idea of the souvenirs and a solid grasp of what sort of things would be popular. They'd apparently already been making and selling a few unlicensed products as a sideline, and had impressed the two Slytherins by showing them off. Blaise and Daphne had seen the potential, taken the idea, and run with it.

Now, *officially licensed* products from the muggle world for the movies, all legally acquired for resale by the Zabini family using the accidental loophole Harry had discovered, were being charmed by Daphne, Fred and George. Moving posters, dolls and action figures that dramatically posed and reenacted scenes, toy lightsabers (of course Harry has shown Star Wars!) that created custom light charms that interacted with each other but nothing else. All of those and much more. Each charm was approved by Flitwick before sale, and half the stock of the store looked to be vanishing in the first day as his overwhelmed friends worked their new shop.

None of the other three stores were getting *quite* as much attention, but they were still seeing brisk traffic. Katie, Alica, and Angelina were working at one. Part time, of course, and only

Katie was there at the moment. That shop was an extension of the Cog and Bell family business that was selling or reselling all sorts of enchanted trinkets and useful items. Nothing high-end, like could be found at their Diagon District shop, but plenty of things that Katie said were made by apprentices or younger family members. Alongside things like enchanted pocket watches, cameras, and wizarding wireless sets, were a variety of other items from other Diagon shops that were using the 'in' that the family had via Katie to resell product to Hogwarts students.

The third store was, of all things, a café. *How* the Hufflepuffs didn't have annoyed House Elves after them for that, he wasn't sure. Maybe they House Elves were providing most of the food? That *would* actually make a sort of sense, given the explanation of *why* all of the shops had gotten approved. Blaise had cheerfully explained *that* part on the train, being the one handling the more 'legal business details' matters of the souvenir shop. Since Hogwarts was getting the same 20% of all profits for each of the stores that they got from Harry and Aurora's theaters, the school was turning a healthy profit off of all of them. Something which Daphne pointed out that the school probably needed, with the costs of rebuilding the damage to the wards after they'd been breached at the end of last year. Without some method to offset those costs, they'd have had to go to the Board of Governors, which was apparently notoriously tightfisted. Or worse, request help with funding from the Ministry, who would have wanted concessions in exchange.

The final store was the only one that didn't have a student involved, and only provided more proof that a path toward self-funding was probably what Hogwarts was looking for here. Hogwarts, the institution not the intelligence, had contracted with local Hogsmeade businesses for the final store. It was stocked nicely and neatly with all the odds and ends that students might have forgotten or run out of. Normally, the only way for younger students to resupply was through owl mail. Even the older students, those who weren't at least seventeen at least, normally had to wait until Hogsmeade weekends.

An on-site shop with all the basics for sale at reasonable (if slightly elevated) prices would be good for both Hogwarts *and* the Hogsmeade businesses. Hogwarts, without the student or teacher business-people involved, would be taking a higher percentage off that particular shop, and the Hogsmeade businesses would see a more steady trickle of sales to the students than before. It would likely mean less business at their actual storefronts during Hogsmeade weekends, but since only a cross-selection would be available at the in-Hogwarts store and prices would be better at their own ships, it wasn't a very big risk.

Of course, it was obvious to Harry that the whole thing was a completely unexpected knock-on effect from the Theater Project. One Harry hadn't predicted at all. Still, if anything, it was only a reminder that others *would* keep change going if he started the ball rolling in the first place. So he considered it a good sign, even if he was a tiny bit annoyed that he hadn't gotten involved with the souvenir shop. Even better, to his mind, many of his friends had picked up part-time shifts or were involved in running one of the stores in some fashion. Which meant they wouldn't be pestering him to be social nearly as often! Wins all around, given that he had a lot of projects he wanted to work on this year...

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-September 3rd-

“Mr. Potter, if you would stay for a few moments, I’d like to speak with you.”

Harry perked up. Remus Lupin was someone he’d wanted to talk to the instant he and Pandora had realized he was at Hogwarts. Neither of them were at all sure what to think of the man, given he hadn’t checked in on Harry at all after the death or imprisonment of his best friends. Yet, at least until legal matters with Sirius Black were *hopefully* mended, something that was still being worked on, he was one of the last close friends of his parents still alive and sane.

Harry had initially hoped that Alice Longbottom or Pandora Lovegood might be as well, but had discovered before ever arriving at Hogwarts that one was in St. Mungo’s with long term spell damage and the other was dead. Even Neville had been a horrible disappointment, not responding to Harry’s initial attempts to prod him with friendship...though Harry had to admit now that he’d been very bad at that. Most likely still was, actually, given all his friends had found him instead of the other way around. He might want to try again with Neville at some point. In the future, at least, when he could handle more social interaction without distractions!

Back to the point. Now, at least, there was hopefully something of a *chance* that Remus might have a decent explanation. At worst, he might have stories to share, even if Harry decided he wasn’t exactly a reliable friend of the family. Following the professor’s request, he held back as the last of the second year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs left. He’d ended up in their class due to how his schedule having been scrambled with the inclusion of 4th year Charms and Transfiguration. Now, he did his best to hope for a positive outcome as he waited for the professor to speak.

“Mr. Potter...or Harry if you’ll allow me?”

When Harry nodded at that the professor slumped with visible relief, took a deep breath and spoke again.

“Right. Harry, I know you’re aware I was friends with your parents, so the first thing I owe you is an apology. There *are* reasons I never contacted you, but they are excuses at best. So, before I explain them, I will first simply apologize for not doing so. For not being around Harry, I *am* sorry.”

Harry searched the professor’s face, and his own tension thawed slightly. This wasn’t a man who was trying to excuse his actions. It was one who believed he should have done more, and was genuinely apologizing for not. Harry would wait for final judgement until he had more answers, but at least the man wasn’t attempting to dodge the issue entirely.

“Why?”

The professor sighed, running one hand through his thinning hair.

“Derke Cadewell told me you were the one to point him to me, that you had some memories of me somehow. Do you remember my...condition?”

Ah. They had theorized that such might have something to do with it.

“Your ‘furry little problem’ as dad always called it? Yes. I am aware you are a werewolf.”

He wouldn’t have been just from his own memories, of course. But Lily and Euphemia had both known. Lily due to James telling her, Euphemia as a result of needing to adjust the wards on

their now-wrecked family home to allow Remus to visit them in his school days. Remus, whose mouth had twitched into a half-smile for just a moment at the ‘furry little problem’ comment, nodded.

“Yes. That’s what I meant. I’m afraid, as far as the excuses I have go, that is the primary reason I wasn’t around. In fact, this is the first time I’ve been back to England since shortly after the war. You see, because many werewolves sided with he-who-must-not-be-named, post-war legislation on them was...not pretty. It is *incredibly* difficult for a werewolf to get work, and thus afford access to Wolfsbane potion, here in the United Kingdom. Most of the saner werewolves fled to other countries after the war, leaving mostly the criminal kind remaining here, which hasn’t helped general opinion of them.”

Harry winced, easily able to imagine the compounding backlash. He hadn’t actually thought to look into such laws, but they hadn’t exactly been overly fair even *before* the war. Now they were probably...catastrophically unfair. The professor’s rueful smile at his wince said he’d followed Harry’s train of thought.

“Even now, Dumbledore is using a lot of loopholes and old favors to employ me. Hogwarts is *technically* its own sovereign ground, not quite subject to the Ministry of Magic’s dictates, due to having existed for far longer than the Ministry. The Hogwarts valley in its entirety was ceded by pre-Statue of Secrecy monarchs to the founders, and isn’t quite part of the British Ministry’s holding as a result. The resulting loopholes let Dumbledore offer me fair employment. Suffice it to say that most werewolves aren’t so lucky, and have trouble getting even menial jobs in the wizarding world. For this reason, as well as to get away from a lot of painful memories, I left England entirely after the war. I actually *did* intend to try and keep in contact at first. But when Dumbledore diverted both magical and mundane mail from reaching you, I mostly gave up. I *should* have stopped in a few times, at least, to check on you...but...”

Harry could see the answer in the man’s eyes, a deep-seated pain that made him sigh. It was unfortunate, but Harry *could* understand, to an extent.

“But it was painful returning here.”

Remus nodded, opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Harry decided to let him at least partially off the hook. Perhaps he might not have, if he hadn’t had Pandora to look after him, but he *had*. Things at the Dursleys hadn’t been *pleasant*, but they hadn’t been *that bad* either.

“I understand. I also appreciate the honesty, professor. I will not hold it against you. Though...I would appreciate some stories about my father if you have the time? I know a lot more about my mother than him, for some obvious and not-so-obvious reasons...”

Remus’s eyes lit up and he nodded immediately.

“I would be delighted to do so, Harry. We could perhaps set up tea on a day we’re both free?”

That sounded agreeable to Harry, and they quickly set about comparing schedules. He still needed to get to the rest of his classes for the day...

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-September 10th-

Harry was fairly certain tits were going to kill him.

More accurately, he was increasingly certain that many of his female friend's *developing* them was going to get him murdered at some point. He was also developing an increasingly complex theorem, much to Pandora's amusement, that certain portions of female anatomy had their own conceptual magic, or possibly their own gravity welst? Whichever it was, Harry maintained that breasts and, to a lesser extent, buttocks, had a supernatural pull of some sort. One that drew the eyes to them, no matter how much willpower one had. Initially, he'd theorized that it affected human males exclusively, only for Pandora to point out the number of *witches* who instinctively eyed other witches busts. Most of them only glanced, though a percentage of them seemed as caught up in them as he or any other wizard.

In support of his theory, the larger the breasts, the more conceptual pull they seemed to have.

Clearly, breast magic was powerful.

Sadly, his obviously-correct theory hadn't been proven yet, which meant he was supposed to not get caught looking. Nor was it considered polite or good for one's social standing to develop an erection every five minutes when around your unfairly attractive and mostly female friends. All of which had experienced *growth* over the summer, and three of which had a 'bad' habit of prancing mostly naked through the Quidditch locker rooms. Nor did Pandora's lascivious comments or occasional hijacking of his glass's X-ray mode help.

Well. He supposed if tits were really going to kill him, he might as well accept his fate. Maybe if he chose just one set, he could die via being smothered by them in his sleep, instead of via being murdered for looking at too many? Who did he want to ask out, though? Mulling that over, he considered that it would probably be Katie or Daphne. Katie was his best friend but a year older, Daphne was both highly intelligent and gorgeous. A great combination.

How did one go about asking doing something like that properly? He was going to need advice at some point, but certainly not Pandora's. She'd suggest he start a harem again. Which, while he wasn't totally against the idea (he was a teenaged male, after all), he didn't think the girls were likely to go for it. Well, he'd figure something out sooner or later, once he even figured out which one of them to ask and what to do with a date. Though the latter shouldn't be *too* hard. He *did* have a few spare projectors and knew where the kitchens were. That whole stereotypical dinner and movie thing from the muggle world would probably work much better with witches stuck at Hogwarts who wanted a chance to see their favorite movie even when it wasn't running...

Chapter 24: Projects, Projects, Projects!

-September 20th-

“Ah ha! It works! This is marvelous! Sure, it might not be as beautiful as an optical view of the night sky, but from what I’m seeing this might open up an entirely new field of magical study!”

Despite Harry’s newly deepened appreciation for girls his own age, Aurora Sinistra’s ass was still one of the most gorgeous things Harry had ever seen. Which was *very* distracting when he was trying to focus on the results of their project himself. Did she *have* to bend over the readouts for their radio telescope that way? Admittedly, he *might* have put them ever-so-slightly-lower at Pandora’s suggestion for exactly that reason, during a moment of weakness. So it was entirely his own fault...

No, the heck with that, it was clearly Pandora’s fault!

That was his story and he was sticking to it, at least, even as he wrenched his eyes away from the sight and to the results. Technically, they had actually completed a testbed prototype of their magical radio telescope before the end of last year. They had, at that time, confirmed that there was a magical component of some sort to the waves they could pick up. That had *surprised* them, given that magic wasn’t *actually* electromagnetic, and even regular magical astronomy relied mostly on inference. The charms and enchantments on the school telescopes that allowed one to view the tides of magic were *representational*, rather than literal.

So picking something up on the EM band from magic when they pointed it at other planetary bodies had startled them.

They also hadn’t actually had any idea how to *plot* what they were seeing, both of them needing to spend some time over the summer reading up on just what muggles did with their version of radio telescopes. Now, the result was on display as the enchanted plotter recorded the interaction between magic and the EM spectrum in a way that, so far as they knew, no one had realized was possible to detect before.

“Huh, that kinda looks like magic is...what, *bleeding into* the EM spectrum, rather than originating from it? Look there, where we’ve detected the interface of planetary magical eddies and the EM spectrum waveforms...”

Sinistra made a noise of agreement, then hummed in thought.

“You know, Harry, I think you might just have solved a mystery with that comment. We already know from muggle science that you can oversaturate a specific frequency to the point that it starts mucking up the frequencies around it with noise. If areas of high magic are bleeding into the EM spectrum because magic’s frequencies are *close* to that spectrum but not actually within it...”

Harry realized where she was going and quickly finished her thought.

“...then we suddenly have an explanation for why magic interferes with the EM spectrum in areas with high-magical density. That would explain a *lot*!”

Aurora nodded, smiling hugely.

“Yes, yes it would. Which means we get to reveal it too. Even if the unspeakables have been sitting on this, they can’t do shit about an independent researcher discovering and publishing it. I

can already see ways this can be used to try and mitigate the issue, or even to try and properly detect the frequencies magic *does* work at. If we combine the logic from these tests with traditional ways to detect magic...”

Harry’s own smile grew huge in reply, even as he actually managed to *not* stare at her tits for once, despite the tight T-shirt she was wearing under her open jacket. They’d discovered something fundamental about magic! That was enough to resist the pull of the Boob Force, at least for a few moments. More science achieved. His Conceptual Boob Force theorem could grow! Someday, it might be even more important to wizardkind, specifically the *wizard* part of wizardkind, than all of his other discoveries combined!

“Right! Now, how can we tweak this? Clearly, the muggles can’t detect magic, so it’s not on any frequency they know of as anything more than a dead spot or ‘noisy’ area. What about if we...”

The pair were off moments later, plotting to crack open more secrets of magic, with no hesitation at all.

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-September 25th-

“No, you’ll need to swap these two runes. The way you have it will technically work, but it’s the equivalent of a double negative in English as is. Awkward and it will cause a week point in the array. Just because it will technically get the result you wanted doesn’t excuse being sloppy.”

Harry scowled as he looked over the section of the array Babbling was pointing to, reluctantly nodding as he saw what she was talking about. He agreed completely with the professor’s statement about sloppiness after all, even if the need to swap the runes was going to force him to wipe the sand table and start over. That was annoying and some might have wondered why his mentor insisted on it. Sand tables were, explicitly, for rapid prototyping, after all. Harry, unfortunately, understood. Not only did having to repeat the entire array help it *sink in* that mistakes were costly, but it also encouraged good habits later.

On the sand table, you could theoretically merely change something. Indeed, that was what they were for, and once a certain level of mastery was reached, he wouldn’t have to do the repetition. Until it *sunk in*, though, the repetition had value in and of itself, helping to improve his runes as a whole...even as the habit of caution was learned. You could fiddle around with an array on a sand table like that, swapping runes freely mid writing. You could *not* do the same when carving an actual working array. The different possible meanings of every rune meant you still applied a degree of *intent* when carving. Trying to alter that intent once it began was a fantastic way to end up with a spectacular, and potentially lethal, failure. Getting into the habit of never assuming you could do so safely was a lesson all rune scribes needed to be taught. Even if it was frustrating while you were learning it.

Even as Harry sighed and wiped the table clean with a spell, preparing to start again, the professor spoke with curiosity in her voice.

“What do you even want that array for, anyway? I’m not quite seeing the value of determining the specific state of a light spell and returning it?”

Harry stiffened. That was a...loaded question. In truth, the answer was simple. It was also, unfortunately, revealing if he gave a full answer and he internally cursed himself for getting impatient. He should have waited until he could do this without oversight! It's not like he was anywhere *close* to being able to use the end result of the project, after all. Carefully, he tried to give only a partial answer.

"It's mostly an exercise in 'can it be done?' One that, if the answer proves to be 'yes,' will help with a number of other projects down the line. This project itself has no real value all on its own."

True. Misleading a bit, but true. Harry was attempting to leap *ahead* of muggle computing, in a way that currently wasn't possible for the muggles. All existing computers used Base-2 math, using the 'on/off' logic gate for every individual circuit. Attempting to go any farther, even just to Base-3, had so far been a non-starter. Signal noise and hardware degradation meant it was impractical to have 'on,' 'off,' and 'some' states when you were working with a physical circuit and electricity. It required too much precision to reliably read 'some' across every single circuit switch out of thousands or tens of thousands.

Harry was trying to build his own future computer system with a fully functional Base 10, instead of Base 2. Magic didn't have the same issues with signal degradation and noise, at least not so far as he could tell. Since *intent* was involved, rather than a strict measure of physics only, it should theoretically be possible for his 'circuits' to consist of a spell that had ten possible states. Which could then be read by the rune cluster he was currently creating, with the 'intent' embedded in the array ensuring there were no inaccurate or noisy results. Given that miniaturization was going to be a stone-cold bitch, getting more out of each circuit was important. Eventually, when miniaturization *was* sorted out, it would also make a magical computer superior to its muggle counterpart. Though that might well be decades from now.

Babbling, thankfully, was nodding along to his comment.

"A piece you intend to plug into larger arrays. Normally, I would discourage thinking like that so early in your work with Runes. But the Arithmancy Calculator proved you've already wrapped your head around the concept of modular arrays as part of a larger array of arrays. I'd still caution that you should mostly stick with simpler arrays for now, as normally the modular bits aren't viable all on their own. This one specifically is, even if it doesn't do much, so it will be fine. But keep it in mind for future projects."

Untensing, Harry nodded. As always Professor Babbling made sense. He would have to pick out something simpler to do. Which, honestly, he should have done in the first place. Even assuming he got *this* little array working, it was one of what would likely end up being *hundreds* that would be needed to make even the most basic of magical computers. He'd gotten impatient and needed to remember to walk before he ran...

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-September 28th-

"You look considerably more constipated than usual for working hard on a project Har."

Harry twitched at the teasing tone coming from Katie. He hadn't seen her as much for the first few weeks of term. Not only was his own schedule different and busier, but Katie had been putting in shifts at the new extension of her family's shop. Something she *needed* to do, in order for it to stay as a 'student business.' Apparently, either a student or professor needed to be involved in any such on-grounds businesses, in order to get around the need for approval by the Board of Governors. It wasn't something Harry had realized, having not needed to worry about it with the Theaters due to Professor Sinistra handling everything on that side of things.

Now, everything had finally started to settle down a bit, after the unexpected start-of-years changes to Hogwarts. Which meant that Katie was back to semi-regularly invading his workshop to see what he was up to. Unfortunately, she'd found him after he'd lost an argument...

"I lost an argument about what my next project should be."

Katie raised an eyebrow, not saying anything as he twitched again.

"...I wanted to do something more complicated. But it was pointed out to me that I should stick with relatively simple rune clusters. Like copying and adjusting the ones Professor Sinistra used to make the Memory Projector work."

Abruptly, Katie's laconic, lazy flop across a chair shifted into an attentive pose.

"You're duplicating the Memory Projectors? Oh! Please tell me you're going to sell those! Wait, actually, do you want to license making them? My family would *totally* love to produce them for our shop."

Harry blinked, stopping his work on carving a rune cluster Professor Babbling had approve him to replicate. He...hadn't actually considered that. Katie's family specialized in various forms of clockwork and enchanting, specifically rune-based enchanting. They'd easily have the man and womanpower to make more of the Memory Projectors once he finished refining them a bit more. For that matter, they wouldn't be a bad choice for mass production of the Arithmancy Calculators either. So far, everyone that had tested one of the calculators was raving about them, even if long-term tests for stability were still ongoing.

"Huh. That might not be a bad idea. I'll have to talk to a few people and see if Cog and Bell might not be a decent choice for producing more units of a couple of different projects. As for the Memory Projector, yes I'm planning to sell them as a much cheaper but more limited alternative to Pensives. I'm working on improving the design first, though. The original prototype was meant to be handled by someone who really understood what they were doing. I'm trying to simplify it for the average Joe, as well as add some additional features."

Katie practically bounced with sudden interest.

"Ohhh, walk me through it? I might not be a proper apprentice yet, but I might be able to suggest some things from what we do at the shop! My parents always say we have to design for the 'lowest common element of stupid!'"

Harry snorted at that, then nodded his head. It certainly couldn't hurt, at least. If nothing else, talking it through with someone other than Pandora would likely help him spot bits to improve on.

"Right. Well, the first part is the memory loading. Extraction is a separate problem that I doubt the average wizard or witch will be able to handle. But loading them into the device is currently a bit finicky too..."

Chapter 25: Tentative Teenaged Romance

-October 1st-

"So, you're going on a date with me."

Katie blinked and looked at him with a baffled expression, which might or might not have had to do with him wiggling his fingers ridiculously in her face while he said it. The fact that there was a little bit of a blush as what he'd said properly processed as well was a good sign, Harry thought. He'd ended up asking, of all people, Fred and George for help. Despite their lack of seriousness in most matters, the duo had...'game'...as Harry had heard Seamus and Dean insist on calling it. Bare weeks into the year, they'd landed dates with Alica and Angelina, and he distinctly remembered both of them having dated a few girls the previous year as well.

This, unfortunately, had made them the closest thing he had to experts within his circle of associates. Ernie was mostly falling flat with his own attempts to get his own dates since the year started, and Blaise...nope. Not messing with that, given who likely gave Blaise his own dating advice. If his infamous mother hadn't killed off yet another husband since the last time Harry looked, he'd be surprised. As well as reluctantly impressed by whatever wizard had lasted longer than usual.

Thankfully, the Weasley twins had, after thoroughly embarrassing the fuck out of him, actually given what he was pretty sure was sound advice. Pick your target carefully, have the right incentive, and be *brazenly* confident in the delivery. That had actually helped him narrow things from Katie and Daphne to just Katie, as he wasn't sure he knew what 'incentive' would appeal to Daphne. Katie, on the other hand, he had a good card to play. At least so he thought.

"Oh, I am, am I?"

Katie's eyes narrowed just a bit now, and Harry forced himself to smile hugely as he bowed flamboyantly in her direction.

"Of course. Unless, that is, Mademoiselle doesn't want to see an advanced screening of The Addams Family. If you're not interested, then I'll understand~. It might break my heart, of course, to need to keep the Pumpkin Spice Toffee, Witch's Brew Lolis, and Red Hots all for myself..."

Harry watched Katie's expression shift from narrowed, to surprised, to delighted. He braced himself, ready for her tackle-hug. Picking her up, she squealed as he swung her around, looking flushed as he dropped her again.

“Soooo...may I have a date with the most beautiful Katie Bell?”

Katie grinned this time.

“With a bribe like that? You can have two! At least if you find something good for the second one, too...”

Her tone was teasing, but there was a bit of a blush back on her face, which reassured Harry that it wasn't *just* the bribe at work. Though the bribe had certainly helped him get away with the way he'd gone about it, he was sure. Katie, for all that she was *technically* a pureblood by legal definition, had enough members of her extended family that *weren't* that she was fairly tuned into the muggle world. Harry had discovered last year that she was a monster movie fan, when she'd pouted about him not having any of them for the Hogwarts theaters. She'd also waxed poetic about the best kinds of Halloween candy to eat with a monster movie marathon, and Harry's perfect memory had been able to summon up those favorites and acquire the lot.

The Addams Family had released last year while Katie was at Hogwarts, and he'd managed to snag a release of it from a second-run theater with an eye to running it during Halloween season this year. Halloween was still almost a month away, since it only being October 1st, which meant Katie would be getting an advanced screening in the room he'd set up for the upcoming date with a spare projector. Since it was just in time for the Halloween Spirit to have seized Katie already, his timing had been perfect.

“So, tomorrow night?”

It was Thursday, so that would make for a Friday night date, which he *thought* was supposed to be 'date night' or something? Whether it was or not, he got an eager nod in reply from Katie.

“Awesome! I have regular food planned too, so we can do dinner and a movie without making ourselves sick on *just* the candy. Meet up at the portrait at 7:00?”

Another eager nod...then a second tackle-hug as Katie tried to hide the blush that had been slowly building up on her face as he formalized everything and it set in for her that she had a *date*. It was, Harry thought, a pretty promising start to this whole dating thing. Hopefully, at least.

... ..

-October 2nd-

The movie was good, Harry thought, even as he failed to entirely focus on it. It was *much* more tempting to focus on the way that Katie had snuggled into his side within the first few minutes of the film, bundled up with him under the blankets he'd brought. Her warmth against him, not to mention the feel of her body pressing into his, was far too distracting to *really* focus on the film. That was alright, though. He hadn't exactly cared about the film, after all, and so far Katie seemed to be having a good time. That was the important bit.

The meal they'd started with, cottage pie sourced from the kitchens and one of Katie's favorites, had gone perfectly. Katie had looked amazing, despite relatively casual clothes, having clearly gone to the effort to actually put on makeup for their date, something she normally didn't

bother with. Not that she needed it, honestly. She'd blushed at his compliments, over-the-top in a way that had made her laugh as well, and he'd counted both as a win. Thankfully, the upcoming movie had provided plenty of chance for small talk, as Katie had practically glowed when talking about other 'monster movies' she'd seen, both good and bad. Apparently, for her, even the bad ones were good, since you could make fun of them.

Harry didn't get it, particularly given that many of those fictional monsters were very real in the magical world, but he'd been more than happy to let her talk. She was extra cute when she was excited.

Now, as he sneaked and arm around her to pull her in tighter and she didn't protest, he decided he owed Fred and George again. Sure, he'd given them some more free tickets for the advice, but this had gone well enough that it didn't seem like enough. Maybe he could help them out with the souvenir shop by sneaking them to list of movies that he was intending to acquire every month? That would let them get ahead of the merchandising, though he might have to push for a small kickback if he didn't want Blaise and Daphne to look at the offer with suspicion...

Shrugging and promising himself he'd make the effort to think of something, he settled in to enjoy the rest of the date.

... ..

Harry stared in shock, jaw a bit agape, as Katie darted up the girl's dorm stairs. He knew the date had gone pretty well, or at least he'd thought so? But he certainly hadn't expected the quick kiss, on the lips no less, that Katie had given him before she'd fled! Still, it certainly did support his idea that it had gone well, didn't it?

Stumbling away with a head full of fuzz, Harry was already trying to figure out what else he could do for that second date that Katie had promised. Something down by the lake, maybe? Hmm, October in Scotland might be a bit cold for that, though warming charms and bluebell flames could maybe take care of it? Well, he was sure he'd figure it out, one way or another. If nothing else, he could ask Pandora for ideas. He'd refused them for the first date, wanting to figure it out himself, but he didn't think he'd mind a few ideas to pick from for the second.

After all, with 150+ years of memories from various witches making up much of her memory, Pandora should have a few good date ideas that had gone well...

Chapter 26: Halloween is Clearly Cursed

-October 31st-

Harry froze as, sitting by the lakeside with Katie and Remus, he felt his wand begin to thrum a low warning. Katie, despite her love of Halloween, had absolutely insisted on joining him as he sat vigil by the lakeside again this year. Remus, meanwhile, had both every right to mourn Harry's parents, and was reassurance for the other professors that Harry wasn't out on the grounds alone as night fell this time. In truth, the vigil had even been a bit more upbeat, if in a melancholic sort of

way. Remus had brought his own scrapbook and told quite a few stories about James, and fewer but just as good ones about Lily.

Except now Harry's wand was thrumming a warning again.

It had been *twitchy* for most of the month, reacting to *something*. He'd told the professors about it, but after weeks of nothing happening, had pushed it from his mind. The wand had really only warned him *properly* three times so far, and never in little fits and starts like this, so he still didn't exactly fully trust that he wasn't imagining things. *This* was more than a twitch, though. It was a constant thrum that was slowly building. Entirely too much like what had happened with the Bees last year. Unconsciously, his eyes darted toward the Forbidden Forest. They weren't anywhere remotely near it, though. So where was the threat?

"Professor. My wand is warning of danger. Much more clearly than it has all month."

Remus had fallen quiet from his story as he lost Harry's attention, and now his wand snapped into his hand as he stood.

"Back to the castle! Wands out!"

The barked commands were obeyed instantly, Harry having already flicked his wand out even as he warned the professor, and Katie quickly drawing hers from a pocket. Idly noting that he really ought to get her a holster for her birthday or Christmas, Harry scanned around, even as he started moving...and stopped almost instantly at a warning pulse from his wand.

"Professor. The danger is *stronger* towards the castle!"

Remus hesitated, scowling, then put himself between the castle and them.

"It's still our best bet, and the other students may be in danger if it's not aimed at *us*. *Stay behind me.*"

Katie and Harry obeyed as Remus stalked toward the castle, the older man's longer legs forcing the two of them to fast-walk to keep up. Harry tried to mimic the way the werewolf scanned back and forth, clearly looking for trouble as they advanced. At first, Harry wondered how he was supposed to see anything out in the gloom of night. Pandora, thankfully, was more on the ball than Harry and activated the night-vision enhancements on his glasses quickly. He mentally kicked himself for not doing that himself, even as he started running through priorities.

He had an adult with him, a *competent* one by the way DADA had gone under Professor Lupin so far. Which meant he only really needed to focus on keeping Katie safe, right? She was visibly squinting, not having a werewolf's enhanced senses or Harry's enchanted glasses. Another thing to consider. There was likely a spell to do the same sort of thing, but Harry didn't know it. He should really look into some non-standard utility spells like that.

They were almost to the castle when, abruptly, they heard the screams.

Remus took off like a shot, dashing faster than Harry had any hope of keeping up with, despite being quite fit as whole. Sensing more than seeing Katie stumble as she tried to run behind him, Harry gave any attempt at stealth up as a bad job and shot a ball of light from his wand that

kept pace with them. It was enough that Katie quickly caught up, even if both of them were well behind Lupin as the Professor cleared the main doors...and immediately started firing spells!

They both skidded to a halt in surprise as they reached the doors seconds later, watching as Professor Lupin and several of Hogwarts Knights engaged...piles of vaguely human-shaped, red-streaked mud? For a long several seconds it failed to compute why the Knights were using the flats of their swords and Remus was cycling through a bunch of non-lethal spells. The golems were tall, easily seven feet, but didn't seem very *tough*. Then he saw the face of a student *crying blood* and mouth open in a silent scream, *embedded in the chest of one of the golems* and a horrified realization hit him.

The mud was red-streaked because it had *blood mixed in it*, and each of the golems had a captive supplying that blood.

With a captive in each golem, the Knights were hobbled in their response, and Remus was clearly cycling through non-lethal options as he circled away from the two golems that had locked onto him. They were fairly fast, despite being made of mud, but Remus was faster, and he *had* found a way to deal with their attacks at least. They were lashing out with whips of mud and blood that hardened as they struck, but Remus had quickly figured out that ice froze and shattered the appendages. Every seconds spell from him was bits of ice magic as he neutralized attacks, while trying other spells on the central golems to try disabling them without hurting the victims. Finities of various complexity, stunners, summoning spells, Remus was cycling through quite an array of options, many of which Harry didn't even recognize.

He hung in the doorway for painful seconds as he attempted to figure out how to contribute.

Forcing down his hesitation, he focused on what Remus had proven worked, forming a Glacius Charm and firing it at the ground *in front* of one of the golems. It worked as he'd hoped, the golem staggering as it hit the frozen patch...but then it simply discarded its frozen part and moved on. Still, it *had* lost material. More than it was losing from the attacks Remus was parrying with similar freezing spells.

"Katie! Glacius charms in front of them! Try to strip away their material, bring them down to size!"

Harry put action to words firing several more charms in rapid succession at the various golems, letting more material be stripped away as they tore themselves free. To Katie's credit, a second later, she began firing her own freezing spells. Slower and spoken, but they worked all the same. More importantly, Harry noted, the golems *weren't* reacting. They stayed focused on Remus, their closest opponent, and plodded onward to attack.

Clearly, they weren't very smart.

Now, how to use that? Harry could hear sounds of combat from the Great Hall ahead, and side passages besides. There were more of these things and whittling away at them so slowly wasn't enough. He cursed a second later as, abruptly, their behavior changed and the means by which they'd gained multiple student captives became clear. Both golems chasing Remus *spewed* a dark, thick mud, which Harry could *feel* was saturated with magic and seemed to move on its own

as it curved to follow the professor's dodge. Remus managed to shield himself, with some sort of physical shield Harry didn't recognize, but he was nearly certain from the way the resulting piles moved on their own for a few moments afterward that they would have become another golem if they'd caught him.

Thankfully, he wasn't alone, and Pandora had apparently been diving through memories looking for a solution. It was, of all things, a *gardening* spell that she came up with and shoved to the front of Harry's mind. A modified cutting spell intended to cut through dirt but *not* organic matter, with the purpose of speeding up transplanting plants. Thankfully, as effectively a hobbyist spell, it wasn't exactly complicated.

"Katie! I'm going to use a cutter that doesn't hurt people to slice off bigger chunks of golem. I need you to freeze the chunks once they fall, got it?"

There was a slight hesitation from his girlfriend, but it only lasted a moment or two.

"Got it!"

Nodding, Harry did a *very rare* thing for him and spoke the spell aloud, allowing himself the crutch just this once to make sure he got it *right*. Not hurting the victims was too important for his pride.

"Exradicis Sectator!"

The simple swirl and slash of the spell, overcharged to give it far more range than originally intended, sent an arc of white-green magic through the air. His first spell wasn't quite on perfect target, but still removed a good quarter of the mass of one of the golems. Katie was on the ball, hitting the chunk that fell away with a freezing charm before it could try to reconnect. The golem slowed, having lost enough mass that the student inside 'woke' and started to struggle against it. Harry repeated his spell, aiming so that, should the worst happen and the spell not work as advertised, the student would only lose an arm. Something easily reattachable since this wasn't dark magic.

Thankfully, it didn't come to that, the modified cutter living up to its promise by curving *around* the arm. This time, Remus had the better shot and had realized what they were doing, quickly freezing the bit that had been removed. Enough was removed now that the student managed to struggle free, and Katie's follow up spell froze the last bits of that golem. Now with a working plan, they dove into freeing the other students with a will, Remus quickly picking up the simple spell with a bare few gasped instructions. Soon, they had the four golems in the entry hall down and the students freed, with Remus performing first aid on one of them who wasn't looking so hot, very pale and low on blood.

"Damn! They are actively blood draining the students. We need to move fast! Ms. Bell, stay with these four, defend them if more golems come along. Harry, you and I will work to clear the path to the Hospital Wing!"

Harry quickly acknowledged the order, as did Katie, and they were barely into the next corridor when they heard her telling someone from the Great Hall, where sounds of combat had

ended, what had happened. Hopefully, that would mean they had reinforcements coming behind them soon. For now, they would push on as fast as they could...

... ..

It was only once all students, save for a dozen in the infirmary being treated for blood loss, were pulled back to the Great Hall to sleep in a single secure location, that Harry learned more of what had happened. Just as the feast had been drawing to an end, after many of the students had already separated and even some of the staff had headed off, a double dozen muggleborn students had abruptly begun spewing mud. A potion of some sort, slipped into the food somehow was the current best guess. Since many of those students had already split into smaller groups on their way back to the common rooms, the ability for the golems to ‘engulf’ another student and spread themselves quickly went to work.

The largest number had been in the Great Hall, and had spread fast enough that, combined with an extreme resistance to magic, it had become a pitched battle. There had been enough Professors left there, along with older students, that they’d contained the Great Hall mess *somewhat*, though the four Hary, Katie and Remus had fought in the Entry Hall had come from there. Other places throughout the castle, luck didn’t hold nearly as well. Whole groups ended up subsumed and started ‘hunting’ for more students to attack. Most of those that nearly died of blood loss were from those groups, only Hogwarts herself guiding rescuers to them allowing some to be rescued in time.

Worse, a message had been found.

“The Heir has Returned to Hogwarts. May the Impure beware!”

The message had been scrawled in blood just outside the Entry Hall, hidden by a complex glamor until everything had started. It was one of the few areas with no Knights or Portraits, and Remus and Harry had been the first to spot it as they carved a way to the Hospital Wing through the golems. Given that *every* initial target for the potions had been a muggleborn, even if it had spread to those of all blood backgrounds, the meaning of the threat wasn’t exactly hard to decipher. Though who the ‘Heir’ was Harry didn’t know, nor did any of his friends when he linked up with them.

Even as they all huddled together, using the provided sleeping bags and trying to get to sleep, Harry wanted to grind his teeth. He’d hoped last year was an *exception*, not the norm. This was going to put *such* an irritating crimp in his inventing schedule...

Chapter 27: Staff Meeting

“Well, this was a bloody clusterfuck.”

Minerva’s comment might have startled most of the students, but her coworkers had long ago learned that you could judge just how angry she was in private by her language. Cursing was enough to be alarmed about, but not nearly as bad as the rarer moments when her natively thick Scottish accent started sounding like it might as well be a foreign language. From her tone, she was only *just* on the calm side of that, kept there mostly by the fact they were all exhausted and she had a tumbler of single-malt Scotch older than any of their students to sip.

Well, a second tumbler. The first one hadn't been sipped.

"Not quite the word I would have chosen, but hardly inaccurate."

Snape's dry, sarcastic tone as he swirled his own half-full tumbler wasn't exactly unexpected. It was his first, not his second, the potion master being the least prone to drinking of his colleagues. Like many occulmens, he'd long ago discovered he loathed the lack of self-control alcohol induced in himself or others.

"It's hardly a great outlook, Albus. Particularly not after last year and the intensive security review we just finished. There's no way to avoid bringing in the Aurors again with so many witnesses, either."

The last commentor this time was Flitwick, himself sipping on a cocktail instead of a tumbler of whiskey. Not that there was any less alcohol in it. He just happened to have more of an appreciation for sugary things than the others. Pomona wasn't present, instead looking after the students in the Great Hall, having the least to add to such a meeting. Which left Dumbledore to answer the comments with his own weary sigh.

"No, Filius, it won't look good. Yes, I've already alerted the Aurors and a team will be here tomorrow morning to check whatever they can. Severus, try not to antagonize them when they inevitably ask questions about your potion and ingredient stores."

The dour head of Slytherin grimaced, knowing that they would try to make him a prime suspect, given the circumstances. It wouldn't hold water for long, given there were spells on the rarer stocks of ingredients that could be confirmed untampered with by Lady Hogwarts. Speaking of which, he reluctantly brought her up.

"The genius loci detected nothing?"

Dumbledore's lips twitched at the grudging way the head of Slytherin spoke about Lady Hogwarts. He'd left a negative enough impression on enough students over the last decade to bleed over to the castle itself, and the castle's intelligence was prone to...annoying him...as a result. Nothing truly malicious, but a fair few minor annoyances and pranks.

"Sadly, no. This appears to have been purely potions work, and dark potions are difficult for wards to detect. A number of purely healing draughts would be flagged if they tried, since the difference between cure and poison is often only in the dosage. The glamor used on the writing wasn't anything malicious either, merely complex beyond anything normally taught here on the subject of illusions."

There was silence, one borne of frustration instead of peace, for long moments.

"Then what can we dae?"

More than one person winced, internally at least, at Minerva's slip. Not that they didn't under the lapse, or the white knuckles that her whiskey tumbler was only surviving by virtual of being enchanted.

“I’m afraid there isn’t much we *can* do. The Aurors might get lucky and find some trail, but the magic used here was too complex to believe whoever was behind it will be that sloppy. We can make sure the same thing can’t happen again, some old charms on the tableware that alert to poisons and potions. But as to the perpetrator? We have no leads, beyond the possibility it’s a pureblood, and even that may be a false trail.”

Grimaces met Dumbledore’s statement. Not that they thought he was any more happy with it than they were, his own expression unusually frustrated. Last year had been...a lot. To have something go wrong again so fast this year was building on an already bleeding and salted wound for all of them, the headmaster most of all. For long moments, there was silence, then Filus’s spoke up with in an unusually hard voice.

“I don’t agree with that, Albus. There *is* something we can do. Even if it goes a bit against the grain. We can arm our students to defend themselves. You know I’ve wanted to...*augment* DADA over the years with a dueling club.”

Dumbledore stirred, but Filus stopped him with a raised hand.

“I know you’re against it, so I won’t bring that specific option up. Instead, I want permission to pick out a handful of the students who reacted the best. Potter, Bell, Lovegood, the Weasley twins, Davis, Bones and Greengrass for the younger years. Fairbourne, Clearwater, Fowler, Farley, Haywood, and Hawking for the older set. Possibly a few more, once I talk to a few students and see how everyone reacted. All of the ones I listed already, at least, were quick and creative. They helped their fellows escape the golems, or shielded other students from them by acting as distractions. Many of them managed the same last year, too.”

Dumbledore frowned, but it was Snape who asked the question, his voice snide despite three of the students so complimented being his own.

“What do you want to do with them, create some sort of student enforcers?”

Flitwick shot his counterpart an annoyed look.

“Of course not. I want to give them a basic primer on combat tactics so that the *next time* a ‘clusterfuck’ like this happens, there is more likely to be a student with the right skills on hand to *buy time*. We’ve been relying on luck too much. Seeding even just a double fistful of students trained to think fast on their feet, ones that have already proven they can do so, will increase the odds no one *dies*, by a lot. There just aren’t enough professors to be everywhere, and our Prefects are chosen for good behavior and discipline, not combat ability.”

Dumbledore opened his mouth, visibly ready to shoot the idea down, when McGonagall beat him to it, though not in the direction he wanted.

“I say do it. He’s right, Albus. We can nae be everywhere. So long as he nae be teaching many spells, just how to react, I dae nae see the harm in it.”

The blunt statement was...not what any of them were expecting from the Deputy Headmistress. When they looked at her, though, they could see how tense she was. She downed the rest of her second tumbler and spoke more calmly and clearly as she reached for the bottle to

pour a third. Like any good Scot, she only got more coherent with a good drop or three in her, unlike the bothersome fools who couldn't hold their drink.

"We got lucky. We got lucky twice last year. Both times because of a *first year*, even if an admittedly exceptional one. This time, we got even luckier with several students having to step up despite the fact they shouldn't even have known how to do so. Best give the ones that *did* step up the tools to intervene *right*. They'll do it again in a pinch anyway. Best they know how to do it without hurting anyone or dying themselves."

Abruptly, the three men in the room were reminded that Minerva McGonagall was a survivor of not just Voldemort, but Grindelwald as well. By the time Voldemort came around, she was considered the single most powerful witch in England, and had shifted entire battlefields during the Blood War. Particularly after the loss of her brother Robert had enraged her into fighting instead of the spying she'd stuck to at first. She wasn't truly a fighter, but she was tough and skilled enough that the fact she'd never formally taken such things up was almost incidental.

She was, it had to be said, also very Scottish. Any group that could charge into war bare chested in a skirt with a fuck-off huge sword, produce the likes of Mad Jack Churchill as late as WWII, and invent a game as utterly deranged as *golf* had to be taken very seriously. Underestimate a Scottish woman at your own peril, not just because they had the same blood as the rest of the crazies, but because they *somehow* dealt with all those crazies at home, too.

It was enough to make even Albus Dumbledore decide that tactical withdrawal might be the better part of valor. She might, after all, actually make him do all the paperwork he usually shoved off on her if he didn't agree.

"I...suppose the idea has some merit, Filius. You have permission. Just make sure you teach them de-escalation tactics that *don't* involve breaking kneecaps along with everything else."

Filius Flitwick's very goblin-like smile in response was not *entirely* reassuring...

Chapter 28: Distractions

-November 4th-

The castle and its students were, unfortunately, stirred up for days in the wake of the Halloween attack. A tension that was only increased as Dumbledore allowed Aurors into the castle to investigate what they could. There was no way around that, with too many students having been affected, and virtually the entire student body being witnesses. All of which meant that Harry wasn't exactly getting as much time in on his projects as he'd have liked, being frequently bothered by others pestering him with speculation about events.

Well, that and one other thing.

Thankfully, the 'one other thing' was actually a net positive as far as Harry and Pandora were concerned. While he had gotten some dueling time in last year with Susan Bones, the redhead wasn't all that interested in fighting. She'd gone at it with a certain level of basic determination once deciding it as necessary, but she wasn't *passionate* about it, which had limited

the frequency of their dueling. Daphne and Tracy might have been a better bet, both apparently being quite excellent duelists, but they and Blaise had still been somewhat busy with what amounted to a political takeover of their year in Slytherin. Given that their efforts had outright marginalized Draco, shutting that particular annoyance up, Harry had been entirely okay with their priorities.

That was only doubly true now that he had a better option anyway.

Much to his and Pandora's surprise, just two days after the events of Halloween, Harry had received an invitation from Professor Flitwick. That invitation, which Katie had also gotten a copy of, had invited them to meet with the professor to discuss an 'opportunity.' Unsure what it was about, but certainly willing to hear one of their favorite professors out, both of them had attended what proved to be a most interesting meeting.

Two dozen students in total had been invited, with just eight of them being from pre-OWL years. Of those, five had been from his own circle of friends. Much to the collective shock of the entire group, Flitwick had proceeded to offer 'tactical and strategic combat training.' Not a dueling club, but instead a primer on the dos and don'ts of general magical combat. General tactics and strategies, combat styles, methods of threat assessment, and even some specific tricks and spells. All things that would apply equally to everything from defending against Dark Creatures, to preparing to become a Duelist, Hit Wizard, or Auror.

Apparently, they'd all been noticed due to their rapid and well-executed actions during the Mud Golem Crisis.

Given the current mood of the castle, not to mention that only Luna Lovegood hadn't been present for the attacks *last* year, it wasn't particularly surprising that every single one of the students had accepted the offer. So far, Harry had only been to a single session where the younger years were walked through some basic theory and exercises, but even that single session had been *informative*. Enough so to actually provide a logical framework for the reasons those in Pandora's memories had fought the way they did. Lacking some degree of *context* and *understanding*, he'd struggled to apply lessons from how each of the women they had combat-memories from had fought or dueled.

With that context provided, even just in part, he was already rapidly piecing together a far more coherent fighting style than the ad hoc nonsense he'd been using before. Nonsense he now *recognized* as nonsense. He'd been gluing random pieces together, rather than properly trying to create a cohesive style, and now recognized the problems with having done so. Since he'd tried to take the best bits of several different 'styles' and weld them together, there were *gaps*, not to mention places that just didn't make sense when used together.

For example, he tended to use mostly Charms, like his mother had. This was due to there being far more low-tier defensive and offensive charms accessible without pushing beyond the Hogwarts curriculum level of complexity he was currently at. Yes, he was regularly working with 4th and 5th year spells now, not second year, but he hadn't *really* pushed to add truly advanced spells to his repertoire. Some exotic options, yes, but nothing super *advanced*. The choice had made all the more sense since, despite his wand core leaning toward Transfiguration, he was currently more

knowledgeable about Charms theory due to all the work he'd done to take apart charms and put them back together for the Theater and Telescope Projects.

Nothing at all wrong with any of that...except that he hadn't paired it with his mother's high-mobility fighting style. Instead, he'd been impressed by the way Euphemia Potter had utterly dominated any battlefield from a stationary stance. She'd used a combination of shields, battle-transfiguration, and neigh-on-siege-level spells to simply *take* anything anyone could aim at her and respond with pure escalation. It was a style she'd taught James Potter as well, so he'd thought he was also honoring both of his parents by glueing the bits together.

Instead, what he had was a barely functional mess that only worked because he'd gotten lucky and been shoved into situations where the combination functioned half-decently.

The troll? Pure luck all the way around. The Giant Bees? He'd adapted to high-mobility because he was on a broomstick, making everything line up. Shoggoth? *Someone* else, or *something* else in the case of the Basilisk, had held its attention, so it didn't matter that it would have utterly plowed through any schoolyard-grade defense he could have put up. The Mud Golems? Same thing as the end of last year, as Remus had taken point and the Golems were too stupid to split their attention, so he'd been able to remain stationary and pick them apart.

No, even a single 3-hour session with Flitwick on basic tactics had showed him and Pandora how *lucky* they'd gotten so far. Relying on luck was *not* a great way to stay alive, not when shit like this kept happening. So, even though it took *yet more* time away from his projects, he'd immediately begun to carve out time to train differently. For now, he'd focus on adapting more of his mother's fighting style. He might have the *power* and *talent* to make Battle Transfiguring work, but it was by far the more advanced discipline. Given he was in good shape, had insane reflexes, and his best current area was charms? It would be easier to quickly patch his problems by more completely adopting Lily Potter's style. He could add onto it later, once he had the basic bases covered...

... ..

-November 6th-

"Hello, Harry Potter and companion."

Harry blinked as someone both new and sort of not wandered into the room he'd converted for spell practice. Much like Neville Longbottom last year, Luna Lovegood had been someone Harry had taken note of the moment she was sorted. He hadn't managed to forge a connection with Neville, and Luna being both a year younger and in a different house meant they hadn't crossed paths until the first session of Flitwick's extracurricular 'Combat Basics' seminars. That hadn't been a good place to casually approach her, and he honestly hadn't expected *her* to approach him.

Yet here she was.

She looked quite well-put-together and *remarkably* like her mother had at Hogwarts age. Well groomed, with waist-length dirty blonde hair, bright silvery eyes just a bit big for her face, and

the same aura of serenity that had attracted the notice of the easily-scrambled Xenophilus Lovegood. There were a few oddities, such as a butter-beer cork necklace, but even that was remarkably neat and creative looking rather than bizarre. Realizing he'd been staring just a moment too long to be polite, when she quirked an eyebrow with a tilted smile, Harry pushed onward.

"Ah...hello, Luna Lovegood. I admit I'd been hoping to speak with you, but there never seemed to be a good chance. Not that I'm terribly good with people, it must be said, so perhaps that was merely an excuse."

The smile he got from the younger girl was bright and happy. He was still trying to figure out what else to say when he froze, eyes going as large as hers, as she raised a hand with her wand in it but pointed away...and a *Sprite that wasn't Pandora* formed above the wand tip.

"This is Lily! Named after your mother, you know, since mom wanted to honor her. Can we meet your companion, too? Not introducing her would be a bit rude. Or does she not have a Fairy Form?"

Harry was very much too busy being shocked and mentally scrambling to react to the surprise reveal as 'Lily' began to fly around, studying him. Thankfully, Pandora was not nearly so off-balance, and had more than enough autonomy to form her own Sprite Form over Harry's shoulder and fly down to investigate her counterpart.

"Interesting! My name is Pandora. I took it myself, for similar reasons, since I wanted to honor my other creator! I take it your mother managed to recreate the spell that made me? Though...oh dear, you must have formed when Pandora died, unless she found a way to fix the power tap issue..."

Pandora faltered, seeming to realize she might have just put her foot in it. Thankfully, neither Luna nor Lily seemed offended. Indeed, while Lily flitted around Pandora with equal interest, Luna's smile only grew slightly sad as she addressed Pandora.

"It's nice to meet you, Pandora. Yes, I'm afraid that Lily has only been with me since I was nine and mother died in an experimental spell research accident. Still, she has become my closest friend since then and I am glad I met her, even if some part of me wishes it hadn't been for many years more."

Harry managed to get over his shock at that point and, by some instinct he hadn't even known he had, reached out to lay a comforting hand on Luna's shoulder.

"I'm sure she and my mother have met again, in the Next Great Adventure. Who knows, maybe they've taken some new world or plane of existence by storm and are ruling as the benevolent Queens of Paradise."

He wasn't *entirely* sure why he'd gone with a bit of whimsy. He rarely did that with anyone but Pandora, wanting the adults he dealt with to take him at least somewhat seriously. Even if he himself realized his entire 'plan,' such as it was, was best looked at with a whimsical eye. Science and magic did *not* go hand in hand, not all the time at least. Nor did wholly sane and down-to-Earth people plan to uproot society and force it to grow up into something better.

One way or another, Luna's smile of delight at the whimsy certainly made him feel right about his choice.

"That does sound like something my mother might do. Even if only out of pique that everyone else was doing the fun parts wrong!"

Lily finally spoke, her voice softer than Pandora's, cutely quite fit for the librarian-like outfit she was wearing. Complete with tiny glasses, even!

"Yes, my creator really was quite focused on doing the fun parts properly. Most likely why she gave your father the time of day in the first place. He was nothing if not always ready to go on an adventure."

Lily's voice was...unexpectedly dry. Not severe, just a good, properly British, dry delivery. It was *jarringly* different than the slightly manic sort of humor Pandora Lovegood had favored. After even just a moment of thought, though, Harry could follow the logic in that. 'Lily' had come into existence *right after* Luna watched her mother die. Presumably, she had multiple neural maps, the same way his own Pandora did. If even one of them understood child psychology at all, 'Lily' had probably realized that modeling herself directly after the mother that had just died would likely have been...a rather poor plan.

"Ah, well, it's certainly nice to meet you, Lily. I imagine, given I haven't heard the castle raving about you, that you've kept yourself hidden like Pandora has. Perhaps we can all sit down and talk about how our experiences have differed?"

Lily brightened, with Luna smiling as well. Though it was Luna that spoke.

"That would be nice, I think. We'd like to hear about your projects, too. The theaters are very clever! Even if I'm more interested in magical creatures, like father, both Lily and I are wondering what you'll do next..."

Well, that was slightly disappointing. Then again...

"Well, keep it a secret, but I want to go to *space*. I do have to wonder if there are any magical creatures who have done so where wizards have not. Perhaps you'll have to come and find out for me, once I get there someday?"

Luna *and* Lily's expressions of gob smacked interest were, Harry had to admit, both equally adorable...

Chapter 29: Incidents

-November 7th-

Harry dove, weaving through the Slytherin players as the clearly rogue Bludger followed after him. Why Madam Hooch hadn't called the match with the blatant tampering he neither knew nor cared. If he'd been a *regular* school-grade seeker, it would have been a serious problem for him. As it was, it was honestly far more of a problem for the Slytherins. After all, even in a regular game, Harry had quickly become well known for disrupting chaser plays. That one of the Bludgers

was so doggedly chasing him? Well, that just gave him a game-legal *weapon* to work with. One of the Slytherin chasers was already down on the ground, out of play entirely after his broom had been wrecked when Harry deliberately put the chaser between himself and the rogue ball.

Seriously. What the fuck was wrong with the ref that she hadn't called this yet?

Well, whatever Hooch's damage was, Harry wasn't going to cry as his barrel roll around another chaser resulted in said trailing Bludger smashing Marcus Flint directly in the face. Hopefully, the brutal psychopath wouldn't actually die from that, but if he did, Harry figured it was Hooch's fault for being an equally psychotic bitch who was apparently okay with what was happening. More importantly, since Harry had allowed Pandora to start tracking the Snitch on his HUD the moment the cheating had become obvious, the move hadn't been pointless. The Bludger being tied up trying to murder Flint via percussive facial rearrangement gave him *just* enough space to snatch the tiny golden ball out of the air...then dive again to avoid that stupid Bludger.

Moments later, as he heard the end of the game called, he flicked his wand out and blasted the stupid thing into *very small* pieces as it tried another pass at him. Possibly, he should have tried to keep it intact for an investigation, but he was too pissed to care about that. Now, how did he file a formal complaint against the Hogwarts flying professor for blatant stupidity and student endangerment? There was no way the 'professor' could have failed to realize the Bludger had been rigged, with how blatant its actions had been...

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-November 9th-

Harry woke to the sound of screams and the smell of burning cloth. Adrenaline kicked in quickly, but even that wouldn't have been enough to save him if the portable ward stones he'd used since first year didn't have a mild protective shield. It was one meant for pranks, not outright attacks, but it still absorbed the first fireball that the flaming figure in the room had launched at his bed before failing. Given the various attacks in the last year and a half, Harry slept with his wand holster under his pillow, and he had his wand in hand fast enough to throw out a Flame Shield spell before a second orb of fire zipped through where the now-defunct wards *had* been.

Flame wrapped around his shield, blocking traditional sight, but Pandora was already bringing up his HUD and she'd long since adjusted to the high ambient magic and complex wards of Hogwarts. He lacked his glasses, but Mage Sight spells were a *thing*, and she'd worked hard on integrating a less complex version into his HUD. It wasn't nearly as good as the enhancement on his glasses, those being meant for curse breaker work, but it was more than enough to highlight what his whirling mind decided was probably another type of golem. With his Flame Shield still going strong, maintained by his wand, he raised his off hand and fired an Ice Spear wandlessly.

He had, after the mud golems, decided that looking into more elemental magic was a good direction to go. It had paid off against the mud golems, just as the Elemental Cascade spell had paid off against the Shoggoth last year and fire spells had work perfectly against the Giant Bees before that. Harry wasn't one to ignore usefulness when it was shoved in his face repeatedly that way, and had dove into his Grandmother's research on Druidism and Shamanistic magic. Elemental spells were actually quite uncommon, beyond some basics, within modern European

casting schools. A few high-tier fire spells like FiendFyre and the Firewhip spell existed, but the other elements were almost tragically underrepresented in modern European magic.

That most certainly *hadn't* always been the case, though.

Euphemia Potter had done a *lot* of research into using elements via more Druid and Shaman type spells, while working to create the Elemental Cascade. Which meant Harry had quickly found the Ice Knife spell, intended to literally create a knife of ice that could be either used directly or flung at a target. Ice Arrow and Ice Spear were two more spells that escalated off Ice Knife, and he'd learned them both. Ice Arrow launched a fast bolt of ranged magic shaped like an arrow, that then *spread* ice over whatever it hit. Ice Spear, on the other hand, was a more brutal and close ranged option. More transfiguration than charm, though it didn't fit either in full due to being a Druid-derived spell, it created a brutal *thrust* of ice from the ground, in a straight line towards the target.

In this case, it cut right through the flames and slammed into the Fire Golem, launching it backward.

Thankfully, it slammed into a wall, not one of his dormmates' beds. Less thankfully, the conflict of flame and icy created *steam* hot enough to burn. His classmates cried out in pain and Harry winced, even as he himself was protected by the anti-heat properties of the shield he was still maintaining. Not willing to risk that again, he shifted to an Earth spell, targeting the stone of the castle and hoping it didn't resist. Thankfully, the castle was apparently aware of what was going on, and he felt his magic slip through the protections against such baked into the very stone of the castle. Before the Fire Golem could get back to its feet, enormous stone hands formed and clapped around it as the Earthbind spell took effect.

With more time to think now, Harry shuffled through plans and picked one that should work. This time, he chanted, leaning on the more free-form type of druidic casting rather than flinging spells reshaped for modern magic, he formed an earthen wall around the struggling golem. Once it was totally incased, save for a small opening, he thrust his wand at that opening and willed the Aguamenti Charm to come out as close to freezing as possible as he began to absolutely fill the sealed area with water. More steam hissed, but it was trapped this time, and he could see the Golem's magic giving way under the weight of water. He flinched as, a moment later, the Earth wall shook as the golem *self-destructed* in a last 'fuck you.'

He wanted to check on his dormmates, but he could hear shouting and spellfire from elsewhere still. Racing out of the room, wand drawn, he hoped everyone was okay. He really hoped that fighting golems wasn't going to keep being a theme for the rest of the year...

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Harry was not a fan of the frequency in which he was ending up in the Headmaster's office. Not because he was in *trouble*, but because he was being debriefed after some disaster or another. There had been one such after the Giant Bees, he'd avoided one after the Shoggoth only by virtue of being unconscious in the hospital wing, and this was the *second* one this year. The first had been relatively short, a brief debrief right after the Mud Golem fiasco at Halloween. The fact that Remus had been with him the entire time meant that 'The Adults' only needed a minimum of information

from him. Mostly the details of the modified cutter he'd provided, along with a quick rundown of events from first warning to securing the Hospital Wing.

This second meeting was looking to be far less swift.

In part, that was because the incident was *technically* less broad in scale. Only Gryffindor and Hufflepuff houses had been affected this time, not the entire school. The Fire Golems had sprung from the common room fires, having been fed the blood of several fire-based magical creatures that had been stolen from the Care of Magical Creatures enclosures. Only the fact that several of the students who'd now had multiple sessions in Flitwick's Combat Basics seminar had been present in each house had kept anyone from outright dying...and several students had been burned badly enough they were now in St. Mungos.

"So we figured out that shields could keep the steam away from people and the Freezing Charm would hurt the golems. We worked our way down the stairs with shield-and-volley group tactics once we realized that, meeting Harry and the Weasley twins in the common room where they were putting the hearth fire they were spawning from out."

Katie was the one that had been giving the report. The most serious injuries in Gryffindor had come from the girls' side due to the very first golem going up the boys side dorms targeting Harry above everyone else. Something that was an anomaly in and of itself, as all other specific targets had been muggleborn. Harry was grateful for whatever had caused it to prioritize him, as the lone muggleborn in 1st year was on the boys' side and likely wouldn't have survived if he'd been targeted in his sleep like Harry had been.

The girls had been somewhat luckier in that someone awake after hours in the common room had managed to warn them by fleeing up the stairs before the rush of golems. They'd been *less* lucky in that only Katie and a single seventh year that had been slow to wake had been part of Flitwick's training. Katie had managed to stall long enough for others to weigh in and figure out how to fight back, but more golems had made it into the girls' side than the boys.

"So, the question becomes, who was this targeted at? Hufflepuff and Gryffindor *do* have the largest muggleborn populations, but Mr. Potter being targeted puts a bit of a different possible spin on this."

The comment had come from Pomona Sprout, but several others nodded. It was Remus who spoke up as a follow up.

"Given he was the only half-blood targeted before fighting back, it does make one wonder if this doesn't have to do with the Blood War. He'd be a priority target for any former Voldemort followers...or possibly their children, as much as I don't want that possibility to be what we're dealing with here."

Snape was quick to try shooting that down. Understandable, given that the majority of the old Death Eater children were in his house.

"It's unlikely to be a student. Not unless they are getting help somehow. This was more ritual magic than anything. Complicated and esoteric. Well beyond what students can manage."

As much as several people wanted to disagree, Dumbledore was quick to support the comment.

“I believe Severus is correct, this work is too complex for a student to be behind it, even if the idea of an infiltrator getting in after our improvements to security is distressing.”

Harry was about ninety percent certain that the Headmaster’s tone of voice had been intended to suppress the idea in front of the students still present. Yet, at the same time, he couldn’t help himself in speaking up to point out the glaringly obvious. Adults were sometimes idiots, like Madam Hooch who was now being reviewed for questionable practices within her field. Hopefully. He’d taken the time to file the complaint, at least.

“Potions and ritual work, Headmaster. Both are things that could be pre-prepared for a student to activate by someone outside the castle. Hard to detected but, if done correctly, relatively easy to *use*. It might not be a student creating the work, yet it could easily be one applying the magic. Dismissing that option when it’s the most likely to be true would be foolish.”

The Headmaster frowned, clearly unhappy with the turn of conversation, but he nodded acknowledgement to Harry’s words.

“Something for the Aurors to figure out when they arrive, Mr. Potter. For now, I believe it is time for you and the others to attempt to return to bed. Hogwarts Knights have now been stationed in the common rooms and dorm staircases, to make sure a repeat of this attack cannot easily occur. Sleep potions will be provided, at least for tonight, if you feel you will be unable to return to sleep. Classes for tomorrow, or today rather since it is now past midnight, have been cancelled in order for everyone to properly rest.”

The students all recognized that for the dismissal it was, stumbling up out of their seats and off toward the staircase. Harry was a bit better off than most of them, having grown somewhat used to adrenaline crashes at this point, yet he was still grateful to be returning to his bed. He followed after the rest of the Gryffs, even as he thought to himself that his next runic project was going to be replacing his now burned-out portable ward stones with something a bit more potent...

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