

Harry Potter: Pandora's Box

(Chapters 30-33)

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 30: Lull

-December 1st-

Three weeks had passed since the attack on Gryffindor tower, with not so much as a peep of additional trouble. Unfortunately, with the Aurors having failed to find any trail to the perpetrator of the attacks, the castle had only grown increasingly tense. Everyone, it seemed, was waiting for the other shoe to drop. After everything that had happened so far, both last year and since the start of this one, it was understandable that no one had faith the problem would just...go away.

Harry didn't have any particular faith in that idea, either.

Something which *really* annoyed him, as it had forced him to shift gears away from his work on refining the Memory Projector and focus on more practical issues. Namely, increasing his odds of not dying the next time something went tits up in the not-fun ways. He wasn't the only one, of course. Even the regular students had gotten a bit of a crash course, courtesy of temporary changes to Defense class, in a few basic spells to keep themselves safe. Which spells depended on year group, of course, and Harry had sadly already had better options than anything Professor Lupin had introduced to the second years.

Thankfully, lack of spells was not his issue, and he had new dueling practice partners with several of the students that Flitwick had picked out. Katie and Susan were decent, but it was honestly Daphne who was the true challenge among the students his own age, with Luna being a surprise second. In Luna's case, a lot came down to an extreme talent for lateral thinking and a spell repertoire easily as exotic as Harry's own. Courtesy, Harry assume, of Lily and the memories implanted in Luna's version of Pandora. In Daphne's case, on the other hand, it was raw dueling skill and her extreme talent for charms that made her dangerous. It was she who had handed Harry the majority of dueling defeats from someone his own age, though he still won as often as he lost.

Still, spell practice and refining his own fighting style were only *one* way of tackling the problem.

The other had come in his preparations for dealing with the possibility of being ambushed again. Something for which he and Pandora come up with two solutions. The first was Harry, with lots of help from Pandora's library of memories, managing to craft a new set of crude wardstones for his bed. They weren't nearly as skillfully done as the privacy-focused pre-made wardstones that had been destroyed, but they were considerably more powerful against direct attacks. Something

which gave them some measure of faith that being ambushed in his sleep wouldn't be the end of him just yet, as it almost had with the fire golems.

It had been a sucky and sleepless few days while they'd gotten *that* sorted out.

Their other project dipped into areas Harry hadn't been intending to touch for years yet. He and Pandora had always been focused on the idea of making inventions to drag the Wizarding World into the future...or at least the present. Yet, that hadn't prevented them from filing away dozens, hundreds really, of other ideas inspired by the many sci-fi and fantasy works Harry had watched or read. They had theory-crafted, mostly for fun rather than any sort of intent on actually making them, quite a few weapons that would replicate everything from 'glows in the presence of enemies' to 'terrifying orbital siege weapon.'

Currently, with Harry's limited ability with runes and only what knowledge of physics he'd been able to learn from his own independent reading...they couldn't make any of them. Actually, that wasn't *quite* correct, but most of the ones they *could* make would either fall afoul of Ministry laws, or else wouldn't offer anything that basic spells and a wand didn't. A magic gun wouldn't honestly be all that hard to make, even at his current skill level. Yet, even if you loaded the bullets with potions, one of many theory-crafted ideas from his younger imaginings, it wasn't really any better than the ability to silently point-cast a fireball or piercing spell. Both of which were things Harry knew how to do by now.

Instead, they'd built onto the idea of the portable wards he'd already needed to learn about for his room's protection anyway.

It was, once again, Euphemia Potter's knowledge and research into *other* schools of spellcraft, beyond the roman wand-based style that was the dominant magical system of modern Europe, which illuminated the way for them. Even the wand style of spellcraft had, in ancient times, been augmented by things like armor and melee weapons. There was a *reason* Hogwarts had once possessed classes that trained skills like swordsmanship, even if those classes had been defunct for centuries. Almost every system of magic had means to create magical *protection* that could be worn. Properly treated dragonhide could turn quite a few minor spells. Enchanted platemail like the Hogwarts Knights were made out of could eat blasting curses with a yawn. *Ancient* battlemages had needed to seriously invest in protections of various types.

Some of that had died with the Statue of Secrecy.

Even more of it had died with the invention of spells like the Unforgivables. For which there were no magical or physical defenses possible. Well, not anything you could just *wear* at least. Nor were the Unforgivables alone in being able to bypass armor, even enchanted armor. In fact, many were the spells that had come out of those ancient battlefields *specifically* to do so. In point of fact, the Unforgivables themselves had come about in the Middle Ages, for much the same reason that muggles had developed firearms. Their origins being as mundane as the constant struggle between armor and weapon, despite their fearsome reputation in the modern age. Dozens of other spells, from dark spells like Fiendfyre, to elemental lightning spells, which were *hard* to control but which most magical shields had a weakness to, could similarly bypass protection.

Harry and Pandora privately thought the lightning thing might be related to their discoveries with Professor Sinistra. On the possibility that magic had a 'energy frequency' that was somewhere near the electromagnetic spectrum, though not part of it, it made a sort of sense that the EM field lightning created might screw with magic. Really, an inverse of magic messing with electronics made a sort of sense, if you thought about it. Not that it was particularly relevant, unless their research eventually turned up a way to harden protections against such a thing.

Dragging things back to the point of his current project, though, Harry and Pandora had ultimately settled on trying to revive the idea of wearable protection, in a way subtle enough that no one was likely to notice it was there. Specifically, they wanted something wearable which would automatically block a broad spectrum of mid-level or lower spells, physical attacks, or elemental damage types. Getting that sort of power and complexity into something which was *portable* and *hidden* had been an admittedly interesting challenge. It wasn't exactly in fashion to where a breastplate and helmet, after all.

It was a challenge which he felt they'd made enough progress on to test, which is why he was currently rigging a thick belt to a test dummy.

They'd tried a number of different wearable objects, originally hoping for an armband or necklace, before quickly realizing that Harry just flat out wasn't good enough at making runes yet to make ones that small. Instead, they'd settled on the idea of a Shield Belt, since it would at least be *under* his robes, and thus not immediately obvious he was wearing it. Of course, making an array on a *flexible object* had been an entirely new challenge that...had failed spectacularly. He wasn't skilled enough for *that*, either.

Which is where dipping into his grandmother's far more esoteric spell knowledge had come into play. While modern runic arrays essentially baked a spell formula into an object, *Druids* had instead used runes merely as an anchor for a spell. Using just one to three runes, a single runeword really, that resonated with a *specific spell*, one could make a spell cast *on the runeword* stick around for far longer than it normally would. Therefore, you could cast something like an intent-based shield onto a runeword in the morning, and have it last for the entirety of the day...or until triggered.

This had problems, of course.

The first was that 'until triggered' caveat. As the runeword was only *sustaining* the spell, not empowering it, the spell was only good for however much power you put into it from the start. Once triggered, it would only last for as long as the cast spell would have lasted on its own, cast traditionally. So, if you cast a Protego charm with a reactive modifier, it would spring up and block *only* the amount of damage you could have blocked with it originally. Likewise, it would only stay up for the duration it would have with the static amount of power originally provided. Afterward, that runeword would be 'empty' again, and useless until refilled.

The second major issue with the method, the reason why runes weren't used this way very often any longer, was that it didn't do the one thing runes were now most often utilized for. Specifically, it didn't remove the *intent* of the spellcaster from the equation. Elder Futhark still required some intent when setting runes, but that intent was only required to refine the *meaning* of

the runes, from among the many possible interpretations. Once you'd set it all up correctly, it would perform the same task, the same way, every time.

Druidic use of runes wasn't like that.

Instead, the intent was in the *spell*. Which meant you had to wrestle the correct intent into shape *every single time* you refilled the runeword. If you were feeling particularly irritable and antisocial one morning and set a physical impact shield to a runeword, you might well make it interpret someone trying to give you an *unexpected hug* as an *aggressive action* and reason to trigger. Potentially causing the person trying to hug you to abruptly break their nose against a shield harder than a stone wall that sprung up in their face.

Not exactly the *best* choice for a protection you were wanting to use day-to-day.

Unfortunately, it was what Harry had to work with. The fact that there were two of them to double-check their intent, and Harry was a fairly advanced Occlumens with good emotional control, *should* mitigate the risks. More to the point, this was also only supposed to be a temporary measure, until they could come up with something better. Give them a year or two to advance their study of runes, and they could almost certainly work out a better solution.

As it was, it was time to see if it worked at all. Stepping away from the dummy, moving back several paces to where he'd upended a desk as a barricade against accidents, Harry carefully poked his wand over the desk and fired a basic blasting hex.

The fact that the dummy immediately caught fire, half turned into feathers, then *exploded*, was *not* a particularly good sign...

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-December 3rd-

The second Quidditch match of the year had, at least, not been cancelled. Though it was clear that the crowd was a little on edge. Given both the attacks this year *and* the fact one of the games had been attacked last year, that was more than a little understandable. The fact that the older years of each house seemed to have had both the thought and the organization to arrange themselves at the top of the stands, where they could keep an eye both outward and inward? That was honestly somewhat reassuring to Harry as the game started and they shot into the air. The fact that Madam Hooch was still present, and had glared darkly at him, was far less so. Apparently, she'd either been told, or figured out, who had filed a complaint against her for not responding to the blatantly rigged bludger of the first game.

Well, hopefully it at least meant she wouldn't be stupid enough to allow a repeat performance. Though he suspected he needed to play an immaculately clean game if he didn't want her to throw every possible penalty at him. He should probably keep his habit of disrupting chaser plays down to a minimum. With that thought in mind, he gave a signal to Wood and shot upwards, looping over the stadium in a far more classic Seeker Sweep than usual. Doing so had the advantage of throwing off the Ravenclaw Seeker, a pretty girl named Cho Chang that was new to their team this year.

He'd noted her hesitation, the girl likely having been told about his usual tactics and needing a moment to react to the unexpected divergence. After a few seconds, she'd apparently decided to circle opposite of him rather than following him, running a similar sweep. The rest of the opposing team had clearly been caught off guard as well, as it took a few minutes for the Beaters to start directing shots his way. Thankfully, neither of the bludgers was tampered with this time, and Fred and George were on top of it. Harry barely had to pay attention to dodge the one shot that would have actually reached him, simply rolling his broom over to duck under it as he continued to scan.

He got bored almost immediately.

He was so used to being more aggressive than this that he was barely able to properly focus, half his attention getting pulled by Lee Jordan's color commentary. Admittedly, the older teen was *good* at the announcer thing, making it much more interesting to listen to the play by play than hunt a tiny golden trinket. Why had he wanted to be a Seeker again? Oh, right, he'd basically been shanghaied into it and had been bored enough last year that the team trainings had honestly been a relief.

Bah.

Resisting the temptation to cheat a bit via Pandora, he buckled down and flew on...

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The game had gone well, even if the lack of action had left Harry a bit bored, he'd at least gotten a thrilling chase as Chang had spotted the snitch first. In the end, though, he'd managed to outfly her to another victory. It had been a close thing, closer than any other victory before, and he knew it was mostly his own fault. Playing traditional Seeker was just...boring to him. Yet the one time he'd gotten fed up and tried to run his usual style, he'd been proven right by Hooch awarding three penalties in barely ten minutes. Oliver had ordered him back up out of the scrum as a result, leaving him frustrated.

Honestly, he'd been just about ready to quit by the time they'd gotten back to the locker rooms.

Until, that was, he was reminded that there was *another* reason he loved Quiddich. Specifically, that *all three* of their female teammates were blatant teasers who happily pranced around in nothing but wet towels. The fact that Katie, specifically, had taken a chance when none of the other guys were looking to right flash him, giving him his first proper look at a naked girl in the flesh, had left him a bit dazed...and failing to suppress a boner.

Katie *probably* wasn't aware that his memory meant he could examine every detail of that momentary flash at length now. Though maybe she was, given her own experiences with him memories and the Memory Projector? Well, whatever the case, it was too late for her to take it back now. Particularly as Pandora had promptly put the memory in a frame and displayed it prominently in the mental space she presided over. That mental space wasn't exactly a normal thing for an Occulmens, being more a Pandora thing, but it meant that anytime he zoned out to talk to his oldest companion more directly, the framed shot of nude Katie was just...right there.

He wasn't going to say anything about it, either. Unlike his weak attempts to get her to knock off fiddling with the X-ray feature of his glasses. His girlfriend *had* let him see on purpose, after all. So he felt absolutely zero guilt in appreciating the result. Though speaking of his girlfriend in general, it was past time he came up with another good date idea. They'd only really been on two proper dates so far, after all, before things had gotten hectic.

"Hey Pan? You worked out a list of date ideas, right? Got anything that will work in a Scottish winter? I think it's supposed to be snowy soon."

Thankfully, his constant companion *immediately* produced her list, and enthusiastically started going over it with him...

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-December 11th-

"You know, for a while I'd thought you'd forgotten we were dating, Har~."

From the happy, but slightly dangerous, tone of Katie's voice, Harry was very glad he *hadn't* forgotten. Sure, he'd gotten tied up working on his protection projects, but he *had* made sure to eat meals with Katie and such. Admittedly, they hadn't been on an official date since the attack on the tower, though. Which is why he was *extra* glad that he'd asked for Pandora's advice for a wintertime date. It *had* taken a couple of extra days to put everything together, but Katie was obviously very pleased with the results, so he was sure it would be okay.

The pair of them were out on the grounds, despite the falling snow. In fact, it could be said that they were out on the grounds *because* of the falling snow, with Harry having chosen his day carefully. The legitimate snowfall had made the magic Harry worked for their date much easier, with Harry unsure he could have even pulled it off otherwise. Said snowfall wasn't touching either of them as they sat on a large stone by the lake, which had been treated with a number of overpowered heating charms to make for a warm seat. It wasn't the stone's heat that was protecting them from the snow, of course. Instead, that was a variant of the bubble-head charm that used a handful of runes to anchor the bubble as a dome over their picnic spot.

The result was a clear area, warmed by the stone, with a thin film transparent enough to watch the gentle flurries of snow through. The effect was somewhat like being in a sort of reverse-snowglobe, with the snow on the outside, and a warm peaceful space on the inside. They were snuggled up together, surrounded by bluebell flames and sipping hot chocolate, after already having a nice thick soup that suited the weather outside. It was evening, but curfew wasn't for a few hours, and they were simply relaxing and chatting as they enjoyed the view.

"Of course I didn't forget. Things just got a little hectic for a bit. I'm sorry I haven't had more time..."

Pandora had made him promise to say that, even if Harry didn't think it had exactly been *unreasonable* to be busy after someone tried to assassinate him! It seemed to be the right thing to say, anyway, as Katie grinned up at him, the last little bit of annoyance that had been in her words fading away.

“I supposed that’s understandable, and you do seem to have a talent for picking dates. I wonder, though, if there’s something else you might have a talent for?”

Harry wasn’t at all sure what she meant at first, but found out a moment later as he ended up with a lap full of Katie Bell and lips crashing into his own. He wasn’t at all sure he had a talent for the snogging that followed, but he was certainly willing to learn...

Chapter 31: Escalation Engine

-December 17th-

It was only three days before the Winter Holidays, and Christmas cheer had managed to cut the tension in the castle quite a bit. Decorations had gone up, and Lady Hogwarts had gotten involved in making them a bit *extra* this year. Half of her additions puzzled people, admittedly, at least under a few particularly nerdy Raveclaws got involved and started identifying old traditions that had long since faded out of fashion. Cross-dressing Hogwarts Armor Suits, wearing animal masks and dancing jigs were identified as something from the ancient Roman. A large burning log was identified as a Yule log from more Nordic traditions, and a dozen other bits of holiday history from the last thousand years had been tracked down and identified.

Perhaps most notable were the *feasts*. As in *more than one*.

Every night for the last several days, the House Elves had, apparently under orders from Lady Hogwarts, provided a series of feasts from different holiday festivals that had been held a some point or another within the walls of the castle. A fair few pickier eaters had been put off by some of the options, but most students had embraced the interesting foods that had arrived at their tables, and tonight was no different. The feast this evening was apparently Roman, with the starting dishes having been light foods ranging from eggs and salads to shellfish. The main course had since arrived, and proven quite to even the pickier eater’s liking, as it included an impressive range of roast meats. Pork, duck, boar, and stews of lamb and fish.

Most found something to enjoy in the slightly exotic flavor to the various seasonings, spices, and rubs, with conversations having been upbeat since the start. Even Harry, despite increasing levels of paranoia after no follow up attacks had come for over a month, was managing to relax. In no small part due to having a happy Katie snuggled up next to him. They had, in fact, managed to practice the skill of snogging quite a few times since the snowglobe date by the lake, though neither of them had made any push to go farther than that.

Unfortunately, just as the deserts came out...there was a massive thump that shook the castle.

All conversation in the Great Hall came to an abrupt end, even as numerous Hogwarts Knights stopped acting festive and began mustering toward the door, lances and spears leading the way. As the second massive impact struck what students and staff now realized were the *main gates of the castle*, shut against the winter chill, everyone began to react. Before the professors could properly do much more than shout for the prefects to gather the students, a second

disruption made itself known as the twelve large *Christmas Trees* in the Great Hall mutated, springing to life with an angry roar.

So surprised was everyone, that only Dumbledore and Flitwick's reflexive casting of banishing charms protected everyone from an initial barrage of sharpened pine needles that fired into the students. Many of the Hogwarts Knights, notably those armed with swords or axes rather than lances or spears, diverted a moment's matter, charging the trees with glowing weapons and hollow roars of their own. *That* spurred a few more people into action, Professor McGonagall transfiguring the High Table into a massive pair of lions half the size of the trees, which proceeded to tackle the nearest two.

A flame whip from Dumbledore set another ablaze...or tried to, as it failed to burn despite being wrapped in fire. Snape had tried something similar, a blazing bolt of nearly-white fire having struck out at another tree, only to barely scorch a few branches. A bevy of other spells from the faster staff and students followed them up, with a few trimming branches or blowing off chunks of bark, but failing to do much damage. Obviously, whoever had prepared these newest golems had accounted for the traditional weaknesses that might have been present in *wood*.

It was Pomona Sprout who bypassed that to truly strike first blood.

She wasn't the duelist or powerhouse that some of the other staff were, so she'd been slower to react. What she *was*, however, was a world class wrangler of all things *plant*, and her own acid-yellow spell caused one entire Christmas tree to *wither*, the strides it was taking with just-grown legs stumbling as it began crumbling to dust. The Hufflepuff Head was forced to yelp and duck behind a shield conjured by Flitwick a moment later, as *four* of the unoccupied trees responded with a massive volley of glowing pine needles.

Harry and Katie had been slightly slower to respond than some of the others from Flitwick's class, having gotten a bit *tangled up* in each other trying to scramble to their feet. When they did, however, they responded in completely different fashions. Katie fired a flurry of ice spells, learned from Harry after they had proven useful in previous incidents, at the nearest tree. Meanwhile Harry completely and utterly ignored the trees to focus on the fact that a third massive impact had caused cracks to form in the Main Gates. Pandora had highlighted that fact in his vision, and he'd paled, having a much better idea than most what sort of massive force it would take to damage the heavily enchanted Hogwarts Gates.

His own first spell, as a result, was a transfiguration that lanced out toward the entry chamber. For a moment, the spell faltered as the on-guard Lady Hogwarts nearly rejected the effect. Thankfully, the Castle seemed to realize what the spell was intended to do after a brief moment and allowed it through after that first, instinctive, resistance. Large wedges of supporting stone formed out of the floor, all angled to brace the gate, just in time to take some of the impact from a fourth strike that shook the massive door, causing it to bulge inward. The wedges cracked but didn't fail, the enchantments on every stone of the castle coming into play. A follow up spell from Harry repaired the cracks...but couldn't do anything about the fact that the Gate itself was starting to come apart, splintering under the raw force of the blows.

Thankfully, the trees, at least, were being wrangled by this point.

Sprout had managed to down another one, while Dumbledore had shifted the fire of his whip into chains that trust up the one he'd originally wrapped in the whip. A flame-to-iron transfiguration that would have boggled the mind of anyone who'd actually had a moment to think amongst the chaos. Older students had noted the success of McGonagall's lions, and had conjured or transfigured their own creatures to tackle the golems. Though the largest of them was a massive bear which, despite its size, was only half the mass of one of the Professor's lions.

Into the fray had also stepped the glowing weapons of the Hogwarts Knights. Their empowered blades were doing considerable damage to the bases of the remaining trees, even as other students threw volleys of spellfire into the upper boughs. The tree golems were at least *contained*, if not outright losing just yet...but only a tiny handful of others had realized what Harry had. That the golems *inside* were only a distraction from whatever was crashing into the Gates from *outside*. Luna, of all people, was one of those few, and had shot some sort of purpleish glue spell at the Gate, which seemed to ooze into many of the cracks in the door to hold them together.

Unfortunately, clever as that was, it didn't matter as the *stone holding the Gate anchors* gave way with the next impact. The one after that shattered the reinforcements Harry had created, flattening the Gate. Finally, even as the sixth of twelve Tree Golems was defeated, everyone was treated to the sight of what had been battering its way in from the outside. A sight which, abruptly, made the length of time since the previous attack make entirely too much sense.

After all, it must have taken a horrific amount of time and effort to turn the *Steam Locomotive of the Hogwarts Express*, all seventy-five tons of it, into a *massive* golem.

The sight would have been ridiculous, if it had been anything less than horrifying. The locomotive had been twisted and bent, its wheels becoming massive joints in arms and legs made out of its pistons. The 'face' of the train had become the face of the golem, its forward lantern dropping down before it like a single malevolent eye. Thankfully, it appeared the tender had been separated from it, but the resulting golem was *still* a good forty-feet tall, needing to hunch slightly to get through the gaping hole where the massive Hogwarts Main Gates had once been. It was met with a charge by those Knights which hadn't been crushed by said Gate, the reason for the lancer and spear Knights remaining at the door now apparent.

Yet, despite the power and reach of their weapons, they were fleabites to the sheer *mass* of this new threat, and it ignored them entirely as it stalked through the entryway. Harry acted quickly, another transfiguration spell reaching out, pouring power into the rubble that had been the braces he'd made. The stones had lost their enchantments, but there was still a *lot* of mass in that rubble, and he formed it into the basic shape of smaller wedges in front of the train golem's feet. It came down on those wedges and stumbled for a moment...before the stone cracked and turned to so much gravel under its weight. The action had, as best, bought a second or two.

Thankfully, despite the chaos the trees were still causing in the Great Hall, no one had missed the earth-shattering entry of the locomotive. McGonagall's own transfiguration of more rubble into great chains that caught its arms slowed it at least a little, though perhaps only a second or two longer than Harry's own attempt had. Other spells bounced off, to no real effect at all on the massive monster.

Then Albus Dumbledore proved once again why Voldemort had been scared to face him directly.

Harry had no idea how he'd done it, given he'd been too occupied with the Lich Quirrell had become to even *witness* what Harry had done at the end of first year. Yet, somehow, he'd *recreated* the Elemental Cascade spell that Euphemia Potter had never shared with another living soul. Moreover, unlike Harry, Dumbledore had both the raw power and *control* required to manage the second split, chaining *seven* elements into the cascade, as his grandmother had originally intended. That much, at least, Harry had shared with the old man when he'd inquired about the spell Harry had used. Apparently, what little he'd said, proud of his grandmother's spell as he'd been, had been enough for Dumbledore to infer the rest.

Now, with a casting time that was half what even Euphemia had ever managed, the Siege Spell lanced out at the massive golem as a Hagrid-thick *beam* of multi-colored power. The sheer amount of magic radiating off that beam caused virtually everyone else in the hall to *flinch*...and it proceed to *carve a hole* right through the core of the Hogwarts Express Golem. The beam shot *through* it, in fact, continuing on, out into the night. Harry was stunned enough that, for a moment, his only thought was 'I really hope that doesn't hit something anyone will miss. Like a mountain, or possibly a small moon.' There was a brief pause to nearly all action, save for the thrashing of the last two tree golems still being put down, as the world itself seemed to wait for the result.

A result that was obvious a moment later as the half-slugged golem that had once been a steam locomotive sagged to the ground and failed to so much as twitch. Dumbledore's voice, a moment later, was audibly tired as he issued commands.

"Pomona, put those last two trees down. Prefects, collect your students and move to the common rooms, Filus please lead the other professors in making sure the students get safely to bed. Minerva, Severus, with me please. It appears we will need to arrange alternative transport for the students to go home for the Holidays..."

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Albus Dumbledore sunk into his chair, more magically tired than he could remember being since his infamous duel with Grindlewald. Despite what he was sure Mr. Potter was thinking, he hadn't had enough time to *truly* reproduce the admittedly intriguing spell that his grandmother had created. The copy he'd used to put down the, and part of his brain was still a little incredulous at the thought, *golem someone had made out of the Hogwarts Express*, was still crude as best. The result of that crudity had been the spell costing far more magic than it should have, and only Lady Hogwarts bolstering his strength had allowed him to pull it off at all.

He wasn't exactly as young as he used to be, and didn't routinely use that sort of magic. Never had, really, even at his peak. Siege spells like that were very out of style, which is why he'd made the attempt to reproduce it at all. Even a weakened version had managed to *hurt* a *Shoggoth* of all things. A Shoggoth that was still entirely too close to this school for his own liking. At least the time he'd spent on his crude reproduction had proven worthwhile, as had the effort of deepening his connection to the Castle so he could draw on it as a source of power.

Still, for the moment, he had other concerns. Minerva and Severus were present, and he had more to discuss with them than just the fact they were going to be out one means of transportation for the holidays. Floo connections could easily handle that particular issue, with the Hogwarts Express really having been more a quaint tradition than an actual necessity.

“There have been absolutely no unauthorized entries to the Castle in the last month. I’ve been carefully monitoring the wards, which as you know are now reporting more than they ever have in the past. Unless someone has been able to hide from some of the most advance wards on the entire planet, and do so often enough to put in the hundreds of hours this plan must have required, there *must* be someone inside the castle working with whoever is behind this.”

He *hated* admitting that. A distaste he could see mirror in Minerva’s face, though Severus merely nodded. The much younger man had only been against that possibility at all as the most likely place to point fingers was at his house, something he cut off at the knees when he spoke up a moment later.

“I’ve already investigated my own House, Headmaster, as the possibility was never overly improbable. I’ve monitored the coming and going of my own students much more closely than usual, tracking down those who exited after curfew. I’ve disrupted a few...other activities...but no one student of mine has had the required block of time to do something this...*involved*.”

Albus grimaced, but nodded. Normally, he’d have discouraged such close monitoring of students. In truth, the curfew was less rigorously enforced than the students believed it to be. It was the sort of rule they set in place specifically to be broken, knowing that there were *always* students who would want to push the boundaries of what was allowed. Better they get their illicit thrill by breaking a rule that caused little to no harm, instead of getting up to something truly dangerous. If they were caught, they’d learn a lesson. If they were not? Then they’d at least get their rule breaking somewhat out of their system. In theory, anyway.

“No, I still don’t believe this is the work of a student. The amount of *time* required would be beyond them even if they were able to get away. That means it is more likely to be either someone among the teaching staff, or else someone or *something* truly has been able to sneak onto the grounds. The most likely possibility for the latter would be a survivor of the expeditions I authorized last year into the Forest. They would be marked as allowed entry in the wards, and might not be noticed by the improved monitoring due to it being the *old* wards that they were authorized under.”

Minerva stirred, frowning at that idea.

“How likely is that? It seems like a bit of a risk for you to have left that possibility open, after last year.”

He shook his head.

“Extremely remote, fortunately or unfortunately. An edge case at best, with too many things needing to line up *just* so for it to be the case. No, it’s far more likely it’s a professor. The problem, of course, being that all of the current staff are trusted. Yes, Severus, even Lupin. Who I know for a fact he is involved in some business outside Hogwarts that means he wouldn’t have enough time for it anyway.”

Severus looked mulish at that, having very obviously been about to point out the only new professor, one he had a personal dislike for and had advised against hiring, being the most likely culprit. In truth, given the curse on the Defense position, it might have even been true...if that curse hadn't been lifted. Lady Hogwarts had revealed over the summer that the curse was anchored to a particularly vile object in the Room of Requirement. Dumbledore had investigated, and in doing so quite incidentally discovered Voldemort's means of immortality. Horcruxes *had* been one of the more likely possibilities, but it had only been one of several. Thankfully, a few drops of basilisk venom, harvested from the fallen guardian of last year, had been more than up to the task of destroying the vile thing, though he'd lamented the loss of the Diadem of Ravenclaw in the process.

Having confirmation of Riddle's means of survival had also allowed him to focus his efforts more on finding out if the fool had made more than one. Or it would have, if he hadn't had to spend virtually the entire summer repairing the damage to the Hogwarts Wards and fending off Ministry involvement. At least *this time*, he could legitimately point out that the Hogwarts Express was stored in *Hogsmead*, and thus any security for it was the Ministry's responsibility, not his own. Downplaying the tree golems in favor of the much more terrifying...train golem? Locomotive golem? He'd have to workshop a name for it before morning. Playing up its danger, and pinning it on the Ministry if they tried to press, would at least prevent the strained political situation that was already developing from getting worse.

"The question, of course, is what we do about it. Our only choice seems to be to investigate our fellows, but doing so without insulting them is doing to be a headache and a half."

It was Minerva who had spoken up and she was, of course, correct.

"Yes. That is the crux of the matter. The elective professors are obviously where we need to start, so I want to assign the two of you and Filius to begin sweeping them for outside influences. I have to think that some outside factor, such as the imperious curse, is the most likely culprit in this matter..."

He began to talk, making suggestions drawn from both the mess of the Blood War and his memories of hunting Grindelwald, as means from which they could begin with the attempt...

... ..

-December 18th-

Shockingly enough, the massive scale of the attack the night previously had actually resulted in the fewest injuries of *any* attack since the troll last year. Perhaps because whoever had orchestrated it had counted, reasonably it had to be said, on it being the golemized Hogwarts Express that would do the real damage. The sort of spell that Dumbledore had used wasn't common *at all* in modern times. Even 'normal' higher end magic from, say, a dozen Aurors, would have struggled to bring down the golem without losing at least half their number in the process. What honestly *should* have probably been a mass casualty event had been reduced to the worst injury being Draco Malfoy taking a dozen sharpened pine needles to a buttcheek as he attempted to run away.

If Harry was inclined to be charitable, he'd admit that Draco had only been following a prefect's orders and heading for an antechamber that existed behind and to one side of the High Table. One of the Slytherin Prefects had known it existed and directed younger students there in an entirely sensible action that might well have prevented more injuries. Given it was *Draco*, even if the little shit had honestly been marginalized by Daphne, Blaise, and Tracy's efforts, reduced mostly to taunting Weasley...well, Harry wasn't above snickering at the many jokes made about his injuries. Variants of it being a 'proper Slytherin' injury gained from running away, were among the more common flavor. Harry wouldn't make that one himself, for fear of Daphne's ire next time they practiced dueling, but he certainly wasn't above grinning along when the cleverer versions were bantered about in the Gryffindor common room.

Of course, it was a *little less funny* that they'd all taken meals in their common rooms, due to the fact that the 'corpse' of the Hogwarts Express wasn't something that could be cleaned up easily. It was too heavily magical to be easily vanished and too heavy to easily move. Which meant it was apparently going to take until well into the Winter Break before it could be moved, piece-by-piece, back down to Hogsmede. Whether it could be repaired back into the form of a steam locomotive was completely unknown, and Harry had to admit that the idea the tradition of riding the Express too and from the school possibly being at risk was a bit sad. Not least because it had, irritatingly enough, been one of the more *modern* bits of technology that Wizardkind were exposed to.

Honestly, it was tempting to offer a design for a new version of the Express. Perhaps a bullet train or some such? If Harry hadn't still been fairly far off a point where he could offer up such a design himself, without a *lot* of effort, he might have seriously considered it. As it was, while he could certainly imagine *how* a magical train could be done without too much difficulty, actually *making* something that complex would be beyond him.

Maybe he'd drop the idea to Professor Babbling, see if she thought a design competition offered up to the Crafter's Hall might spark some enchanters to give the idea a go? The theaters had been doing *very* well, after all. So he could easily afford to sponsor such a competition, though funding the actual construction would likely be beyond him. At least so he assumed. A locomotive likely cost millions of pounds, right? Hmmm, then again, it might well be possible to purchase a *broken down* locomotive from the muggles for pennies on the pound. He'd contact the muggle agency he used for purchasing film rights and other items on the other side and see if they could find out. Such a bizarre request would likely require a fee for them to hunt down the information, but that was fine.

Okay, damn it. This was *way* more interesting of an idea than his Memory Projector. Which was almost finished anyway. Katie had been a big help in 'stupid wizard' proofing his methods. Come to think of it, she'd seemed to enjoy working with him on the process, before he'd gotten distracted making his wardstones and shield belt. Maybe she'd enjoy the challenge of creating a theoretical model, even if there was *no way* he knew enough about trains to make an end product? Just making the *control systems* would honestly be a fun challenge that was quite in line with his end goals, and he'd likely learn a lot in the process.

Yeah. He'd talk to Babbling. See about running the design competition at least. Then maybe he'd submit his own entry with Katie, even if there was no way it would be picked. Assuming the

Express couldn't be repaired and the school didn't just decide to switch over to using the floo or portkeys to get students too and from the school...

Chapter 32: Meet the Parents

-December 20th-

Harry was trying not to sweat, as he waited in line to use the floo that had been set activated in the temporarily-expanded fireplace of the Gryffindor common room. Just two days ago, he had expected to stay in Hogwarts for Christmas, just as he had the year previously. Given the attacks and the fact he was a target, the idea hadn't exactly filled him with glee, but it was *still* better than going back to the Dursley's. Not to mention that he'd signed up to stay weeks ago, before the latest attack.

Of course, that very attack was what had made the staff change the rules and allow anyone already signed up to stay to change their mind if they wanted to.

It was, however, the invitation from the *Bell family* that had changed Harry's own fate. Just a day ago, Katie had marched into his workshop and told him he was going home with her, waved the invitation saying as much from his family to him, and dragged him to Professor McGonagall's office to make the change. Given that he'd managed to get blanket permission signed from the Dursley's to make his own decisions on holiday breaks from the start, he'd been allowed to do so by the Professor. Frankly, she had seemed pleased he'd be somewhere else. Which, given the whole he-was-a-known-target thing, made sense.

It also, however, meant he was abruptly faced with a meet-the-girlfriend's-family situation he was *woefully* unprepared for, with virtually no warning at all.

"Oh, calm down Harry, I already told you that you don't have anything to worry about. Papa was the one to issue the invitation, and he only did it once I sent him your idea about the possible new Hogwarts Express. He was *already* excited about the Memory Projectors, and now you've dropped another even more impressive idea in his lap. He's just as crazy about enchanting as the rest of the Bell family are about their own focuses, and demanded I bring you home to meet him. I think the only reason he even cares I'm dating you is that it meant I could issue you such an invitation."

It wasn't the first time Katie had said as much, and it also wasn't the first time he'd wished he'd waited until *after* the break to mention the possible idea to Professor Babbling. He'd had a timeslot with her already reserved for the 18th, the day after the latest attack, and had gone to it fully expecting it to be cancelled. He'd been right, of course, but had found her looking over the results of an initial survey she'd done on the remains of the Express. A survey whose initial statement about the possibility of repair had basically amounted to:

'Fuck no, are you stupid?'

It wasn't just the physical damage to the locomotive. Far beyond that, which could have been fixed with a few wand waves, was that absolute *hash* of magics that had been infused in the

wreckage. Already deeply enchanted from the start, being turned into a golem via some sort of large-scale ritual had already made the idea of reusing any of the metal dubious at best. Adding the chaotic, multi-elemental infusion of extremes that Dumbledore's Elemental Cascade had added? Apparently, they were going to be bringing in *curse breakers* just to safely handle removing some of the major parts over the break. There was absolutely no way anyone sane would use even so much as a screw from the wreck without spending serious time and effort to strip the hash of chaotic magic out of it. Admittedly, the Unspeakables were apparently buying the wreck just to study the wild magic infused in it, but it would be for only a fraction of what the locomotive was originally worth.

Harry had taken the chance to suggest his competition idea, and Professor Babbling had blinked...then gotten excited by the concept. Apparently, there were already calls from *both sides* of the usual political divides to have a new Express built. Ones that had, suspiciously, come from the Dark families first, almost before the dust settled the night of the incident. Even with as little attention as he paid to politics, Harry could guess why. After all, he'd already considered just how *expensive* it would be to replace a locomotive, and with the pressure already on Hogwarts, the demands might well see the school forced to rely on the Ministry for aid in replacing it. Something which would damage how unassailable Hogwarts had traditionally been under Dumbledore.

Still, possibly bad for the school or not, it was an opportunity for *Harry's* goals. If the competition specifically required that the new replacement be an *upgrade* to the old locomotive, then submissions would focus on something more technologically advanced than a steam locomotive. Specifically, Professor Babbling had been able to tell him that the original Express had been a GWR 4900 Class 5972 steam engine, built in 1937. Building a competition that favored a more modern style of train would be yet another small victory toward modernizing the Wizarding World...though he actually privately admitted to Pandora that the original Express had possessed a charm that would be hard to compete with. Sleek and futuristic wouldn't quite fit with its role, but *some* upgrades could be made without sacrificing that charm, they both thought.

He'd enthusiastically told Katie about the idea. Who had equally enthusiastically passed it on to her parents via an express owl. Which had all ended up with Harry now unexpectedly going to spend the Christmas hols with his girlfriend's family, who he'd never even met before. Truly, as his and Katie's names were called by their head of house, he considered that staying at Hogwarts might have been the safer option...

... ..

"Katebear! You're home! Happy Holidays!"

Harry, having come through to the 'Belfry' just after Katie, was just in time to see a jovial man with just a bit of a belly developing happily wrap his girlfriend in a hug. Standing next to what he presumed was her father, was a smiling woman who looked *very* much how he imagined an older Katie would someday look, subtle but visible muscles included. It was she who turned away from the happily hugging pair and flashed a hauntingly familiar grin full of mischief his way.

"Ah, and you must be the boyfriend whose had my husband all in a tizzy!"

Harry's brain stuttered as he tried to parse if that was a good or bad thing, not getting a single clue from the familiar sparkling mischief in the woman's eyes. They were a vivid green instead of Katie's brown, but they had the *exact* same look in them as her daughter's often did when she was up to something. Thankfully, he wasn't left hanging for long, as the man separated from Katie and his broad smile didn't let up a bit as he spun her over to her mother and looked Harry's way.

"Ah, dear, no need to scare the lad away by teasing him! Come, Mr. Potter, allow me to introduce myself! I'm Gaius Bell, current owner of the Cog and Bell shop, and father of one delightful ball of mischief! My darling wife is Isabella Bell, from whom she inherited that mischief!"

Far from either of them looking offended, the two Bell women gave near identical smile-smirks of pride at the introduction. Which, knowing Katie...yeah, that fit. She'd clearly gotten a lot of her personality from her mother, just like her looks. Though there were signs of her father in the latter, at least. Now that he'd had a look, it was obvious that Katie's rich brown eyes had come from her father, as had her nose. She was otherwise far more alike to her mother, blonde hair included.

"Thank you for the invitation, Mr. and Mrs. Bell, I admit I wasn't quite looking forward to the stay at Hogwarts this year."

There, something nice and natural...ish. Thankfully, neither of them seemed off put by the allusion to the attacks, both nodding along.

"Bah, none of that Mr. Bell nonsense! Just call me Gaius! Can't stand formality when I don't need it, and I've been eager to talk to you about your ideas since I first saw one of your theaters! Marvelous work, if obviously fairly basic. I can't wait to hear more about these Memory Projectors you've been working on with Katebear, or this idea of making a new Hogwarts Express! Pity what happened to the old one of course, it was a marvelously complex bit of enchanting! But there's nothing to be done about that after the fact."

Harry was put more than a little off-balance by the man's energy. Not to mention the passion in his voice when he started talking about the projects. Maybe this really would be okay? Or, well, he could just be waiting until Katie was out of sight before pulling out whatever the Wizarding equivalent of a Shovel Speech was...

"Oh, stop honey, if you get talking about enchanting projects right away, we'll never get them settled. Come along, young man, we'll get you set up in the guest room. I got one of the house elves from the shop to stop by and clear it out, since it hasn't been used in a while and entirely too many half-finished projects had piled up in it again."

Tentatively, as her father waved them on with a smile, Harry followed Mrs. Bell into the back of the house. Well, things seemed to be off to a good start, at least...

... ..

-December 21st-

Much to Harry's tentative hope, no Shovel Speech had appeared the entire day and evening before. He'd gotten a decent feel for the Bells over dinner, learning quite a bit more about Katie's

parents than she'd ever mentioned. While Gaius was the current *primary* owner of the Cog and Bell shop, the extended family all had shares in it, with several aunts, uncles, and cousins all working for the business. Enchanting and, to a lesser extent, other magical crafting, was apparently a trademark of the family. Both for those born as Bells...and of a surprising number of those they ended up marrying.

Isabella, for example, was one of the few magical forgers in England, an enchanted smithing and metallurgy expert which rather explained the tightly corded muscle her arms showed off. Learning her trade had instantly perked Harry's own attention, and he'd had to restrain himself from instantly asking a thousand questions...though he hadn't been able to resist a *few*. Thankfully, she was just as passionate about her own work as her husband was about enchanting, and happily answered the questions he put to her.

Of course, the business was actually even larger than what the family itself could account for. Something he'd seen when he got a tour that had only just ended half an hour ago. Not a tour of the *storefront*, but of the *much* larger workshop complex that they kept elsewhere. There were apparently a baker's dozen apprentices split between the various members of the family, plus a handful of journeymen that were employed by the shop as well. In total, the impressive business was, according to Gaius Bell at least, the single largest purveyor of enchanted items in England. As well as the fourth largest in Europe overall.

Harry believed it, given what he'd seen so far, though he admittedly had been a bit blindsided by it all. The amount of money a major enchanting supplier like this had to make must be quite high, yet Katie had never shown any of the classic signs of being rich. Though that, he felt, might well have something to do with the fact that *every single member* of the Bell family he'd met so far seemed to be *absolutely mad* for their specific area of focus. He hadn't been ready for it, despite Katie's occasionally sharp interest in his projects, since Katie herself wasn't as...extreme. Something that surprisingly came up now as they swept into Gaius and Isabella's personal workshop back at their home.

"You know, we were all quite pleased when Katie started mentioning enchanting in her letters home! Despite always being just as curious around the shop as any proper Bell, she never seemed to find a specific focus that drove her the way it does the rest of the family. Why, she actually spent more time on Quidditch than enchanting, if you can believe it! But her notes home about the Memory Projector were quite enthusiastic!"

Katie was turning a bit red, looking away sheepishly, at her father's jovial comments. Clearing her throat, she admitted something that took Harry aback, for all that it sounded familiar.

"Harry's projects are...innovative? I never could quite get into the idea of just learning to make the stuff we *already* make. Or to do different variants of the same thing. I think I kinda see a bit of why everyone is so into making things though, if they are *new* things at least..."

Katie's mother reached up to ruffle her daughter's hair, getting a protest from his girlfriend that seemed more performative than legitimate.

"Makes sense to me, dear! That's kinda why I got into forging, since it was nearly a lost art! Very few guides and books to follow and a lot to figure out all on my own! It's not quite the same as

making something *truly* new, I suppose, since I'm usually trying to puzzle out how something old was made to replicate it. Yet I get it a little, I think."

Gaius nodded happily.

"Yes! I'm always happier with new projects than just refining old ones, which is why I'm so excited by Harry's ideas! I'm no good at coming up with new concepts myself, but I do love the challenge of making items to custom order, of getting the enchantment *just right*, twisting it in a new way for a new person's needs!"

Harry thought he understood. All three of them, actually. Katie, he thought, was the most like him. Someone who wanted to do new and exciting things, not finding the idea of reinventing the wheel all that interesting. Not even if it was a newer and more awesome wheel. Meanwhile, Isabella enjoyed the challenge of trying to revive a half-dead art, finding her own challenge in the puzzles of sorting out how something had been done before. Gaius took things in another direction, but one with the same heart, delighting in challenging pieces that stretched him to use his existing knowledge and expertise in new and different ways. All three were *similar* concepts, at heart, yet just enough different in motivation to be subtly alien thought processes to each other's thinking. Innovators, in particular, were rare in the magical community. So if Katie hadn't run into one before him...

"So! You said you have a Memory Projector with you! Can we see it?"

The question from Gaius broke Harry from his thoughts. He blinked for a few moments, considered carefully if he wanted to show two people who could probably replicate his work in their sleep something he hadn't fully patented yet. The consideration only lasted a moment or two, in the end. These people were far more *artists* than businesspeople. More like Sinistra than Babbling. His astronomy mentor viewed their little side projects as merely a passing interest, where their *experiments* with telescopes and radio telescopes riveted her attention fully. Babbling was considerably more business-minded, dealing with contracts and thinking about profits more readily. Though even she was no proper shark. If she was, she probably wouldn't have been a professor teaching her potentially future competition.

"Sure, I brought the refined production model, or the current version of it anyway, with me. I'll go grab it from my things..."

... ..

It had only taken a few minutes for Harry to return with the Memory Projector...but that had turned into a few *hours* of going over it with Gaius. Initially, it had been all three of the Bell family, but Katie was already familiar with its workings and it wasn't her mother's field. After getting to show off her own contributions to 'wizard proof' the design, Katie and her mother had drifted off to talk among themselves. Gaius, on the other hand, had been fully invested in all the theory and details, outright excited to break the entire thing down and offer helpful advice on how to improve it.

Harry had, admittedly, had a return of nerves when left alone with his girlfriend's father. At least until Gaius had noticed. The jovial man had smirked...then told him to relax, and that he

trusted *Katie* to give him a black eye if he ever did anything to hurt her. ‘Too much like her mother for it to be otherwise’ had been his choice of words, voice full of good humor when he’d said it. Embarrassingly, he’d then winked and informed Harry that *he* should come to *Gaius* if Katie tried to go faster than *Harry* was comfortable with.

From how much like her mother she apparently was, and the handful of stories Gaius had cheerfully shared while they worked, that might actually be a legitimate concern...

Still, despite learning entirely too much about his girlfriend’s parents and their youthful indiscretions, Harry had been delighted by how the afternoon had gone. Gaius was a positive *font* of useful advice, and he was fairly certain the Memory Projector had been improved at least another twenty percent by the time they were done with it...and they’d moved right into Harry’s ideas about how to adapt the device for home entertainment for good measure. Gaius was, surprisingly for someone who was most definitely a pureblood, familiar with the concept of VHS tapes and home movies. By the time the two women returned to drag the two of them out for diner, they’d hashed out a viable way something of the sort might be done. It would require an add on, but that was just fine, as it could be sold separately once it was ready to expand the usage of the Projector.

The dinner that followed had been lively, Isabella Bell dragging the conversation away from enchanting and getting stories out of both of them about Hogwarts. Stories which both he and Katie steered away from the dangers of the last two years, even if it did mean talking about a couple of their dates instead. The fact Isabella had declared Harry a ‘keeper’ after hearing about the snowglobe date had been a boost to his ego...even if it probably shouldn’t have been, since he’d stolen the idea from the list of dates Pandora had provided. Apparently, it had been one *Lily* had set up for *James*, in a reversal of the unusual rules that James had been confused by but enthusiastic about.

After dinner, as they settled into a comfortable sitting room, had turned out to be a bit more serious, but in a good way.

“So, what do you think, Mr. Potter? Given that Cog and Bell is one of the larger enchanting houses in Europe, I think you’d agree that it’s a fair offer?”

Harry, who had just finished going over the rough contract details with Pandora’s helps, had to nod agreement. The offer in question was for a partnership with Cog and Bell, granting them exclusive first rights of refusal for any mass-production inventions for the next five years. In exchange, they would handle the vast majority of the business side. Production, sales, and marketing, among other details that Harry would frankly be happier not to deal with. The terms were admittedly generous both directions, with Cog and Bell taking a more significant chunk of profits than they might otherwise...but offering advantages Harry would struggle to get anywhere else in exchange. Such as access to their workshops both personally, and for at-cost production of prototype components he needed by the journeymen and apprentices.

Seriously, it could not be overstated how much that last part would help.

A lot of Harry’s wish list projects were too complex for him to make on his own. Many of them would require skill sets that, on their own, took a decade or longer to learn. Things like

Isabella Bell's magical forging knowledge, or one of their cousins who worked with enchanted glass. Access to at-cost production of components he needed to make things work, all under magical NDA and with a business partner that had a very good reason not to try screwing you over? That could turn out to be absolutely priceless.

Which wasn't even getting to the biggest shock. Which had been a hasty inclusion of an offer to make a joint submission to the competition for the Hogwarts Express replacement that Harry had talked about with Professor Babbling. Harry submitting *on his own* would honestly be a pipe dream. Something like a full-blown enchanted locomotive was *well* beyond his current level of ability. Not to mention that it would be a bit disingenuous to submit to a contest he might well be funding himself. But simply being allowed to add his *ideas* to the submission from Cog and Bell, which would then be reviewed by a neutral panel of experts drawn from the most well-regarded experts across the United Kingdom? *That* was something he could do. Something he *badly wanted to do*.

It was all he could do to remember one of the core rules of business and not just sign right away.

"I admit, this looks like a *fantastic* offer to be, Gaius. But I'm fairly sure Professor Babbling would smack me, and my legal council would groan in despair, if I didn't at least run this by experts first..."

Far from being offended, Katie's father laughed jovially.

"Of course, Mr. Potter. Of course. I didn't mean for you to commit *right now*. But I admit I had hoped we might get it sorted out before Winter Break was over, in order to get a jump on any possible competition."

Relieved, Harry nodded.

"That sounds fantastic. Particularly as I'd love to get your input on some ideas I've had about the Express. The original train was an incredible design, I must admit, but it's certainly rather archaic at this point as well. I'd thought this might be a good opportunity to..."

The discussion would go on well into the night, with all three Bells increasingly eager as they got into the planning for the project. A project Harry had no idea if it would even come about, in the end. Even if it didn't, though, the exchange of ideas and brainstorming session was an incredibly enjoyable way to spend the evening. Doubly so when Katie moving to snuggle into his side didn't get so much as a raised eyebrow from her parents.

Chapter 33: Meddlesome Elves

-January 5th-

Harry had almost forgotten about the unknown house elf from the start of the year, before the Gingerbread Kingdom attacked.

After a pleasant Christmas and a quite a lot of enjoyable time plotting various projects with the Bell family, as well as sneaking out for a bit of 'fun' with Katie had had involved wandering hands joining in with snogging, they had been ready to return to Hogwarts. That was, at least, until the floo had failed to connect. Then, when they'd attempted to leave the house to apparate instead, what seemed like the entire supply of Gingerbread Men for the Greater London Area had attacked.

At first, Harry had thought it was the work of the golem maker who kept attacking Hogwarts, only to see vast swaths of *animated* gingerbread men, gingerbread *tanks*, and a few gingerbread *planes*, all fall to simple finites. The 'army' of gingerbread was, in fact, entirely reliant on simplistic animation charms...and just as critically wasn't trying actually trying to hurt anyone. Jets of icing and dive bombing run merely tried to bully them back into the house, instead. Which, admittedly, *worked*. As much because of the sheer *bizarreness* of it as for any actual threat.

The truth had been revealed when Isabella Bell called out for a couple of the Cog and Bell shop's house elves, intending to use them to relay a message. Instead, the shop elves had immediately scowled...and started popping around like crazy chasing a *third* elf around until they finally caught him. As soon as they'd done so, they'd snapped their fingers and the entire gingerbread army had returned to normal. Which was followed by the pair of Cog and Bell elves dumping a bound and gagged house elf at the feet of their Master and Mistress.

"Hang on. I know this elf. Well, no, not *know*, really, so much as I've seen him before. He appeared last summer, before Hogwarts, and tried to insist I not return because 'dangerous things were afoot.' I'd nearly forgotten about it, given all the dangerous things that *have* happened. But he was the first thing off about this whole year."

Gaius, far from his usual joviality, was looking positively stormy...but his wife was by far the more menacing as she hauled the house elf up to stare into his eyes. He wasn't large, but the fact Isabella did it with one hand, on an arm visibly flexing with muscle, certainly made an impression. She ripped the gag off with her free hand, and the elf gulped as she directed her stare at him, shaking him a little roughly as she did so.

"How dare you waste perfectly good cookies and gingerbread treats! Just what kinda of a villain are you?!"

Wait...*that* was the question she went with?! The elf seemed just as confused, but was seemingly frozen despite that by her enraged glare.

"Cookies are for eating! Fuel for the creation of amazing swords and statues! With this many cookies, I could have been inspired to make ten thousand new things! How *dare* you waste so many precious cookies!"

Gaius Bell was snickering, his stormy look having faded, even as Katie had her head in one hand and seemed to be desperately trying to pretend the scene in front of her wasn't happening. Admittedly, Harry *had* noticed over the break that Isabella Bell seemed absolutely addicted to cookies of all sorts and flavors, but this seemed a bit...well, she might need to sort out her priorities a bit. Clearing his throat, he tried not to flinch as her fiery gaze shifted to locked onto him.

“Ah, perhaps we should find out who he belongs to? It would be more than a bit odd for a house elf to do something like...this...”, Harry swept his arms out to encompass the slain army of gingerbread men, “without orders.”

Isabella Bell seemed to mull that over for a moment before nodding, relaxing her grip as she did. That was, apparently, a mistake. With a squeak, the house elf vanished, the other two elves from the shop immediately trying to follow...but returning swiftly, looking sour.

“No good, Mistress Izzy. He’s fled behind strong wards. Mipsy recognized him, though. A Malfoy elf, Mipsy thinks.”

The Cog and Bell house elves were, it had to be said, easily the best spoken of any Harry had interacted with. Not that he’d interacted with *many*, really only the mystery elf and the ones at Hogwarts. But it was enough to remark upon. He had, in fact, questioned it...only to learn that the Bell family put quite a lot of time into insuring that was so, specifically to avoid incidents with enchanted items. Enough of them responded to voice commands that an elf with the usual odd speech patterns of their kind might well have blown up the shop on pure accident.

“A...Malfoy elf? I’d think it some sort of prank, but I’ve barely interacted with Draco since near the beginning for First Year. Besides, why would he have tried to warn me about danger at Hogwarts?”

The Bells all frowned, and it was Gaius who eventually spoke up.

“Might be that he was trying to warn you about something Malfoy is up to, Harry. People have a horrible habit of underestimating house elves, forgetting they are powerful magical creatures in their own right. The mistreated ones sometimes find ways to...pay back that mistreatment. A well-treated house elf would never do such a thing. But one whose family has abused it might just do so, and Lucius is exactly the sort of arse kissing, bottom feeding, scum sucking parasite that tends to abuse anyone under his power or authority.”

Harry hadn’t had any idea the jovial Bell patriarch could muster that much derision in his voice. Clearly, he had *views* on Malfoy the elder, which is something Harry hadn’t expected. The Bell family seemed fairly neutral, politically. From the startled look on Katie’s face, she hadn’t expected such language from her father either. Isabella, on the other hand, only snorted...even as she gazed forlornly at all the ‘wasted cookies.’ Despite her seeming distraction, she’d apparently spotted her daughter’s shock, and she waved vaguely in her direction before idly explaining.

“The Malfoy family is blacklisted by half the magical crafters in Europe. Pretty much all the *reputable* ones. A bloodline doesn’t get a magically-enforced label of ‘Bad Faith’ without pissing a *lot* of people off. Admittedly, the worst of their wrongs were centuries in the past until the last war, but they promptly sided with that Moldy Shorts psychopath. I don’t like judging others for their blood most of the time, but that entire family is rotten to the core. So much so that I think the *Black* that married into it is probably the only vaguely sane one.”

Harry gaped at Isabella calling Voldemort *Moldy Shorts*. Katie, oddly, didn’t look so much surprised as exasperated. When Harry looked her way, she shrugged.

“As you might expect of one of the premier enchanting groups on the continent, the shop is stupidly well warded. The Bell family moved into it during the war, using some expanded spaces, and no one bothered them. The one time someone actually triggered the taboo on he-who-must-not-be-named within the wards, it was someone in the family that was too curious. The spells tied to it are supposed to let someone slip through wards, after all. It didn’t work. The term ‘spaghettification’ was used to describe what happened to that particular Death Eater team. None of the others ever tried, for some odd reason!”

Gaius had, surprisingly, gained a darkly vicious look for a moment at that, making Harry abruptly glad he hadn’t felt the need for a shovel speech. The emotion was gone from his face a moment later and a deep sadness took its place, taking over from his daughter’s explanation.

“We still lost people, Mr. Potter. Enchanters are highly valued in wartime, and any time one of the family ventured out they were at risk. I lost my father, Isabella a best friend and cousin. Several others less closely connected to family too. Apprentices, in particular, got hit hard, since we didn’t dare take them under our protection when they might be spies or saboteurs. We fared better than most...but they were dark times. Your mother did a lot of good for the world, offing that bastard.”

Harry’s surprise faded as he heard a sadly familiar tale. A lot of people felt the need to say things like that to him, and he’d sort of gotten used to them dumping on him if it came up. It seemed to help them, so he tried not to mind. Though the end there was nicer to hear, Gaius crediting his mother rather than yet another person trying to thank *him*. He supposed Katie had told them Harry’s own opinion on that. Or else Gaius had guessed it was something of the sort, given his area of expertise. Still, probably best to change the subject.

“...Well, we should probably see if the floo is working again, right? Or maybe send for the Knight Bus?”

Gaius’s sheer offense at the idea of the Knight Bus, which he promptly derided as a ‘half-assed, horrible piece of shoddy workmanship,’ neatly dispelled the heavy atmosphere. Though it would take a while for the Cog and Bell house elves to figure out how to unscramble what had been done to their floo...

... ..

-January 8th-

The return to Hogwarts the previous day had been more annoying than expected, even beyond the War of the Gingerbread Men that had tried to prevent him from returning. Every student had possessed a timeslot they were supposed to have used for returning, so having missed theirs by a good two hours had caused nearly twice that in delay. After that, the Bell parents had needed to come through along with Harry and Katie, to explain what had happened. Something which had, in turn, predictably turned into a mini-debrief about what had happened and questions regarding any details they could come up with about the unknown elf. Both from this encounter, and Harry’s first, which Dumbledore pulled out a neatly filed letter to cross reference. The very same letter that Harry had waffled over sending about his first encounter with the mystery house elf just before the year began.

It was nice to know the headmaster had gotten it, at least.

Thankfully, even without it as a reference, Harry's memory was effectively perfect due to Pandora's meddling. He'd not just recited the details of the visit, but offered to show it, still having his Memory Projector on hand. Of course, while Dumbledore had been intrigued by the Projector, it turned out the old wizard actually had a full blown Pensieve available, which they'd all used to watch Harry's first encounter. They'd also gone over the Gingerbread War they'd just been through using it, along with the failed integration of the house elf afterward.

Seeing the perfect clarity of the memories had farther drawn things out, as Dumbledore had asked Harry for copies of his memories of the various attacks in both years. Apparently, he'd gotten some from the staff already, including Remus, but only Professor Snape's were of similar clarity. He hoped another, similarly perfect, point of view might just turn up a clue they'd so far missed. The elder Bells had wanted to see those as well, once they'd been brought up. To his credit Dumbledore had allowed it, with the result that the two parents had hugged their daughter tightly...after Isabella had picked her up and spun her around, calling her 'my little badass!'

Isabella Bell was an acquired taste, but Harry had to admit she was a fun one. He could also very much see why Katie was such an unabashed and unrepentant tomboy. She'd come by it honestly, and her mother probably wouldn't have had a clue how to handle her any other way...

Still, all of that had been two days previously, and Harry was honestly more annoyed *now* than he'd been then. Today, unfortunately, had seen the return of classes, and Harry was once more finding himself *excruciatingly bored* during most of them. He knew, or at least hoped, that being jumped to Third Year Charms and Transfiguration had been intended to help him there. Yet, while it *had* done so ever-so-slightly at the start of the year as the classes filled in bits and pieces of theory gap that he hadn't even known he was missing, that had already faded.

He'd taken deep dives thoroughly into both subjects in his attempt to correct his dueling style, once he realized things weren't calming down and his style was a mess. Fortunately or unfortunately, with Pandora to double check that he wasn't missing any more bits and bobs in his deep dive this time, he'd long since outstripped anything even in the third-year classes. NEWT Ancient Runes was proving much more worthy of distraction, but even there his Winter Break working frequently with Gaius had pushed him forward leaps and bounds. The less said about most of his remaining *second* year classes, the better.

Defense was at least *somewhat* useful for the same reason he hadn't been jumped forward in it. Every class was intended to cover specific practical matters, such as dark creatures or common curses. Since Remus was actually a *good* instructor, who brought as much practical application and spellwork into the class as he could, it wasn't something you could just read from a book and practice on your own. Well, Harry could to some extent, as Pandora could fill the spot of the expert from the memories of fully qualified witches she had. But it still wasn't quite the same.

The other classes were much worse.

Harry *disliked* getting dirty more than he had too, and didn't have much of a green thumb. That made Herbology his least favorite...falling behind even History of Magic. Even in Binns' terrible class he could at least ignore the professor and read actual *good* books on History instead. Potions

wasn't awful, Harry had a decent talent for the art and had been shuffled in with Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw with his odd schedule. Snape was surprisingly almost tolerable with them. Still, he was honestly well beyond the curriculum in Potions Theory, which pleased the professor but didn't really help alleviate his boredom. Worse, Snape wasn't the sort that would give out more advanced work for any reason. The last 'core' class, Astronomy, had been completely removed for him at Aurora's request. With him being a personal student, the Professor was advancing him through far more material than the Hogwarts curriculum covered in their twice-a-week meetings.

The result was that Harry had to sit through a bunch of classes that taught him absolutely nothing, without any friends around most of the time due to his shuffled schedule, and slowly go crazy from boredom. The fact that he'd been so intellectually stimulated over the Winter Hols, working with Gaius and occasionally Isabella on things, only made the return to the underwhelming classes worse. Nor did he currently have much going in the area of personal projects. The Memory Projector was well and truly done, and there was only so much speculation they could do on the Hogwarts Express project without clear goals.

Surprisingly, *that* was one area where someone had hijacked his idea. Apparently, it would be *Hogwarts* hosting the contest, posted to the Crafter's Hall for anyone to take a stab at, and with funding for the actual build provided by several Alumni. Apparently, Dumbledore had foiled any efforts from the Ministry to insert themselves in the project by appealing to the nostalgia of thousands of witches and wizards that remembers the Express fondly. Donations had come in to the tune of nearly a hundred thousand galleons. More than enough to not just pay for the locomotive itself, but the work on it and upgrades to the train cars as well.

Harry wasn't about to protest, in this case, that his idea had been hijacked. Mostly as it meant that there were no complications to be had in his helping submit an entry. Unfortunately, it *did* mean that *someone else* was writing the requirements. A *committee* of Alumni who'd donated particularly generously, as it happened. Thankfully, none of them were people like the Malfoys, who Harry suspected Dumbledore had carefully kept ignorant of the donation drive at all.

Given that *committees* were horrible, slow things, it would be a while before they had enough specs to properly work on the project. Which was why Harry was, once again, staring at his project boards and pacing as he tried to work out which one to focus on next. One change that was at least a pleasant upgrade from his last such session was that Katie was interested enough to weigh in. Though that did make it a *bit* awkward since she still didn't know about Pandora.

Which was something Harry was feeling increasingly guilty about, but wasn't planning to change anytime soon. He wasn't delusional enough to think his very first girlfriend was destined to be his one true love. Sure, it wasn't impossible, and he clicked pretty well with Katie, but he was only fourteen and she was only fifteen. The odds were low they'd gotten it exactly right the first time. Given Pandora was his biggest secret, he wasn't going to explain about her when one messy breakup could cause an ex-girlfriend to blurt it out. He didn't *think* Katie would do that. She'd been a friend first and he'd trusted her enough to let her see his work on projects, but it wasn't worth the risk. Not yet, at least.

"So, I guess your real issue is if you want to keep pushing a theme, or break out into new stuff, huh?"

Harry snapped back from his meandering thoughts and focused on Katie as she gestured at the project boards. None of this *long-term* stuff was on them, of course. But a dozen of his more immediate ideas were present. Stuff he thought was *achievable* at the moment, though varying degrees of difficult. Considering her question, he nodded after a moment.

“I suppose that’s one way to look at it, isn’t it? Even if it wasn’t really an intentional thing, a lot of my ideas for replicating muggle concepts in the magical world are entertainment related. Mostly because I want them to be *household things* that everyone adopts. Looking at what sort of things muggles adopted, or currently are adopting, seemed like a good guide.”

That covered several of the scattered project boards, from the already-half-realized home theater setup, to his desire to make magic mobile phones. Both projects, along with several others, were all ideas that either had a muggle equivalent in reality...or fiction. He had several sketches of ideas that had been inspired more by video games or sci-fi television, that he felt were very achievable via magic. A Virtual Reality project was one of his more complex ideas, just as one example. Something which he wouldn’t even have on the horizon, given its complexity, if he hadn’t already solved half the difficulties for it while working with the Memory Projector.

The *other* boards in the room were a far more wildly scattered set of possibilities. New transportation options to replace the floo or *flying brooms*, non-lethal personal protection devices, industrial automation for fields like potion making, and simplistic computation devices that would build off his calculators. Practical things meant to advance society in some way, but from a more technical angle. He even had a board with a *lot* of question marks, expanding theories he and Professor Sinistra had come up with about how it might be possible to shield magic and electricity from interfering with each other. Though that one was a project he’d probably want to bring the professor herself in on, as they’d been making progress trying to find the ‘frequencies’ that magic operated at.

He really did sort of have two very different ‘themes,’ and the projects Katie was familiar with *did* look like he’d mostly focused on entertainment. She hadn’t really seen his calculators, aside from him showing one off to her parents, and no one at all was aware of the improved telescope and magical radio-telescope that he and Aurora had been working on. From Katie’s perspective, tackling one of the non-entertainment choices would be ‘branching out.’ Though, she still wasn’t wrong about the themes. Which brought a thought to mind, one which made him frown and ask *her* a question.

“If I pushed more entertainment options, would that be too fast? I mean, people are still adjusting to the theaters, and we’re about to release the Memory Projectors too.”

The ‘we’ wasn’t at all a mistake or unwarranted inclusion. His lawyers *had* gotten back to him over Winter Break, and a deal had been struck with Cog and Bell to produce and sell the Memory Projectors. Katie, having helped a lot with simplifying the controls so that even wizards would have trouble screwing it up, had been credited partially on the project. She’d tried to protest when he offered her a small percentage of the profits too, but he’d had an ally in her parents and their pride in ‘their baby girl’s’ first invention! It was only five percent, but given how well he expected them to sell, it would still be a decent bit of spending money for Katie in the future.

Katie, who had been considering his question, had a cute crinkle in her brow as she finally answered.

“It...would probably depend on what it was? You and papa worked out how to make the Memory Projectors take a ‘recording’ with an add-on unit, which will let you distribute home movies and such once the Projectors become more common. Between that, the Projectors themselves, and the theaters, introducing any other media-based stuff might be a bit much for a few years.”

Brow unscrunching, Katie flicked out her wand from the holster he’d gotten her for Christmas, one with a few tricks he’d added himself. He was particularly proud of managing to get one of his protective one-shot rune clusters on it as a metal badge. She’d loved it, and had been playing with the ability to flick her wand in and out of it constantly. Now, she’d managed to catch the wand seamlessly, unlike her early, fumbling attempts, and gestured with it.

She whispered a spell, having stubbornly been trying to work on silent casting since Harry virtually never used incantations. The effect was weak as a result, but all she really needed, as it pulled one of the chalkboards at the back of a grouping forward. The choice made Harry’s eyebrows raise, as it was for a tabletop game similar to Dungeons and Dragons, only adapted for the magic system actually taught by Hogwarts. It had been an idea Harry and Pandora had written down before ever even coming to Hogwarts, but weren’t sure would do well.

“Something like *this*, though? *Lots* of people dream of becoming wizard adventurers and fighting monsters, Harry. It’s different enough to your other ideas to hit a different audience, and I’d bet it would be popular. Heck, it could even be called *educational* if you use accurate monsters with accurate weaknesses. I could totally see Professor Lupin using it in a theory test or something.”

Huh. That...actually, yes. He could totally see the utility there. Not just for Remus, either. Professor Flitwick’s tactics class could easily use it the same way. The game was intended to have little animated figures of monsters for the players to pit their characters against, and Harry could absolutely see using them to work through tactical problems too. The idea of using a Dungeons and Dragons equivalent as an *educational tool* was a weird one. But when you lived in a world with a lot of *real* monsters you might need to fight some day...it made sense.

“Besides, it looks super fun to play, particularly since you included Mage Knights and Flying Artillery Mages. Both of those look pretty cool...”

Katie was blushing as she admitted that, looking away from him a bit. The mix of cute/adorable in that look abruptly decided Harry.

“Well, that’s the project we’re doing then! But, since you’re interested in playing, you’re going to help me! Hmmm, I wonder if Daph would be interested too, given the animated figures? She might be interested in selling it too, since its not too far off the sort of thing they are making for their movie merchandising.”

Katie smiled hugely at the idea of helping, though she looked a little less certain at the idea of Daphne getting involved. For a moment, Harry worried she’d been wanting one-on-one time and

didn't like the idea of another girl being there. A moment later, though, her real reasons became apparent.

"Harry? Are we thinking of the same Daphne? I mean, she's kinda fun-snarky, but she seems *waaaaay* too serious to enjoy making a game. Even if it's one with some practical examples. That seems more Tracy's speed..."

Harry snorted, since she wasn't wrong. Daphne was much more serious than either of them, along with being a bit of a social manipulator type. Though one that was friendly to them, at least.

"Sure, but she loves both charms work and business, and this is potentially both."

Katie cocked her head, considering that, then shrugged.

"Eh, maybe. Girl *does* like playing with animation stuff. I suppose we can ask, at least."

With that, Harry realized he had a new project. At least for now. Honestly, it was pretty low stakes, which suited him just fine for the moment. After all, if the committee for the Hogwarts Express competition got its shit sorted out in a month or two, he'd want to jump on design work for that instead. Not making a super-serious project that he'd hate to be pulled away from was probably for the best...

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