

Harry Potter: Pandora's Box

(Chapters 36-38)

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Chapter 36: Aftermath

By the time the chaos in the school had been brought down to a manageable level, the students safely nestled back in their dorm rooms and the Aurors come and gone, it was past midnight. Considering that the Quidditch game had started at noon, and the attack/ritual itself had taken less than twenty minutes, a lot could be said about how long cleaning up the mess in the aftermath had taken. Conversely, the fact that they were done *at all*, given the complexity of events, was...well, honestly it was a lie. They'd gotten through a lot of what needed to happen, yes. But it would likely be weeks before everything was truly and fully sorted out. Particularly given the problems involved in apportioning *blame* for everything that had happened.

The Ministry, of course, would want to do the simple thing and pin the blame entirely on Rolanda Hooch. Unfortunately for the Ministry, Albus wasn't quite so indifferent or casual with the subtleties of the situation. At the end, their flying instructor had been entirely possessed, to the point there were ongoing questions over if she would even survive the fallout or not. She was currently at St. Mungo's, undergoing intense treatment, and no one was quite sure if she'd pull through or not. Something that had been made less likely by both her age and her gasping demands for them to *listen* before they even treated her.

Of course, the information she'd provided was part of why Albus wasn't exactly blasé about pinning things on her.

It wasn't at all common knowledge to the younger generations, but Madam Hooch was nearly as old as Albus himself. Barely twenty years younger, in fact. She was known to tell the story, from time to time, of how she and her Silver Arrow had survived being singed by muggle anti-aircraft fire during the *First World War*. For that matter, she'd been appointed by the Department of Magical Games and Sports to referee at Hogwarts during Dumbledore's own earliest days as a *teacher*, not headmaster. She hadn't even been employed by Hogwarts until his own predecessor had gotten the idea to create a flying class and hired her on part-time as an instructor, alongside her position with the Ministry department. She was an odd example of someone employed part-time by *both* Hogwarts and the Ministry. In fact, oddly enough, that existing precedent is how Albus himself was able to swing being both headmaster and Chief Warlock under the Hogwarts Charter.

The woman had survived both World Wars, Grindelwald, and Voldemort alike.

Despite what some might believe, she was *not* someone to be taken lightly. Nor someone who lacked common sense or caution. She was certainly no blood purist, and not someone who

could be bought or bribed. Meaning that, when she gasped out that she had been *compelled* by someone to begin writing in the now nearly-destroyed Diary that had possessed her, only a genuine fool would dismiss the claim.

Someone else had stuck a hand into this situation and, given that it was a Malfoy house elf that had tried to warn off Mr. Potter, it was all too easy to imagine who that had been. The *how* remained a mystery for the time being, but the *who* was nearly certain. As, of course, was the *who* that had nearly possessed her completely, as the surviving bits of the Diary had possessed an embossed name that was all too recognizable to him. Tom M. Riddle, a much younger version from what little Hooch had been able to provide before she slipped unconscious, had been the mind trapped within the pages.

The pages of what *must* have been a Horcrux, just like Ravenclaw's Diadem, which Lady Hogwarts had led him to over the Summer, as the source of power for the curse on the Defense Position. Meaning that, given Riddle's particular obsessions, there were nearly certain to be at least *three*, and possibly more. Prior to today, or yesterday technically as it was a few minutes past midnight, he'd only had suspicions that there had been more than one. Suspicions backed by nothing more than rumors of Riddle's shade and the fact the Dark Mark hadn't faded completely away when the Diadem had been destroyed.

Of course, despite his wandering thoughts and the late hour, he still had guests. Even if the Heads of House were still caught up in their own thoughts, they *did* have things that needed saying and accounting for, before this meeting could end. Shaking his own ponderings off, Albus forced the meeting into motion.

"How are the students? I was so tied up with our trio of heroes, the authorities, and other events that I have only a brief account of casualties. No deaths, but 23 in St. Mungos and another two dozen who were treated on site. How bad is it, and what is the morale of those still here within your houses?"

None of them complained. Albus's expertise had been critical to assessing the effects of the ritual, dealing with Madam Hooch and the Aurors, *and* trying to help Madam Pomfrey stabilize the trio of teens that had saved the day. It was believed that Katie Bell, Daphne Greengrass, and Harry Potter would pull through. But it had been touch and go for a bit, particularly with young Harry. There were bound to be aftereffects on all three of them, given what had happened, but what those aftereffects would be yet remained to be seen.

Thankfully, his staff were well aware of what he'd been up to and why he wasn't as fully informed as he normally would be, and Severus was quick to start the reports. Say what you'd like about the man, but he *did* rather fiercely protect his Slytherins.

"Slytherin house was the least affected. Aside from Ms. Greengrass, the worst damage was a severed limb. As there was no dark magic in the monsters themselves, despite the ritual itself being dark in nature, it was reattached quickly and easily. All of my house were treated on site, rather than needing St. Mungos. Though two are in the Hospital Wing for overnight observation."

Predictably, given the personalities involved, Minerva was the next to report her own casualties.

“Eleven of those in St. Mungos are Gryffindor. A larger number of elementals seemed to go after my House, possibly having expected Potter to be among them rather than with the Hufflepuffs. Thankfully, the students gave a good account of themselves, or it might well have been a blood bath. The Weasley Twins in particular, along with a few others of those trained by Flitwick, managed to protect a fair few of the younger years. Unfortunately, despite an incredible showing, the weight of numbers told.”

Minerva took a bracing drink from her second glass of Scotch, poured more from a bottle, and continued.

“It is only the fact that first aid spells have started to spread from Flitwick’s group that kept McLaggen, Spinnet, and Thomas alive. They are the worst injured, two to lightning strikes and a third to friendly fire of a nasty dark cutter I’ll be having *words* with the user of, once I figure out who it was. All three are stable, but McLaggen in particular may not fully recover.”

Dumbledore bit back his dismay at that, as Flitwick gestured for Pomona to go next. The Hufflepuff Head held her head high as she spoke.

“Only four from Hufflepuff are in St. Mungos, all from lightning strikes and all expected to fully recover given time. My badgers did *extremely* well, coming together to protect each other. Though, I have to admit that a part of the reason they faired so well was that Potter, Bell, and Greengrass were sitting in our section. Those three made an outsized difference, particularly the protective dome Potter made and I duplicated for a second group.”

That was better, and Dumbledore was frankly grateful for whatever had led young Harry and his friends to be among the Hufflepuffs. Pomona Sprout was no wilting maiden, but she wasn’t as powerful or skilled in direct combat as his other three Heads of House. Hufflepuff working together had helped, certainly, and there were some exceptional talents among them, but the trio now resting in the hospital wing had undoubtedly tipped the scales somewhat.

Albus turned his attention to Filius, who began to speak as soon as he was sure Pomona was finished.

“That, of course, leaves the remaining eight currently in St. Mungos as part of my own house. Five of them to their own spellcraft, having attempted to be too clever and used untested or poorly mastered spells. Something I will certainly be speaking with them over after they have recovered, and they *will* all recover, though one will take at least two months. The other three were lightning strikes. Serious, but with magic reinforcing the body not lethal, merely annoying to treat. Moving on to morale...some are scared of course, but others are dangerously curious about the ritual itself. I will have to keep an increased eye on the House for a while to make sure they don’t go delving incautiously into ritual work.”

The students wouldn’t have recognized the cheerful Charms professor at the moment, which was *dangerous*. Normally, even in stressful times, Filius Flitwick was somewhat upbeat. He was a half-goblin, however, and someone had managed to seriously injure enough people under his personal protection to get his goblin blood up. Thankfully, he lacked a target for the moment. Less thankfully, without a target it might take a bit for the more cold-and-calculating side of the professor to calm. Though Albus could at least provide an outlet, which he did with his next words.

“Your more personal students made the difference, as you said they might, Filius. On more than just tonight, too. While I’m not willing to expand that little project just yet, I do believe your point has been made and a dueling club is justified. Two years and two disasters don’t quite a pattern make, but it is enough I think we are all better off a bit more prepared.”

Flitwick blinked, then a delighted smile broke over his face. Dumbledore knew the cold-rage wasn’t *gone*, but this concession would help direct it until it had banked. Doubly so because Filius was passionate about dueling for the *art* of it, more than the practical application, which would slowly shift the tone of his emotions.

“Capital, Albus. I will begin organizing it at once. In truth, I believe you will find it a morale booster for the castle as a whole, as well. After all, what better way to overcome a fear from an incident like this than to give yourself the tools to prevent a repeat!”

That...was actually a good point, and one Albus hadn’t even considered. There were a lot of young minds who had been battered by repeated attacks, both this year and the last. Giving them a bit of confidence that they could do better ‘next time,’ even if there hopefully wouldn’t *be* a next time, could only help. He still didn’t like the idea of teaching another generation to fight more than required, but he had to admit it was sounding more and more like a better idea than leaving them insufficiently trained. Particularly with confirmation that more than just Voldemort’s shade was active. If some of his old servants were enacting plans, one might seek him out directly and hasten his return. For that matter, the more ambitious might even try to step into the Dark Lord’s shoes as a replacement, if they thought they could get away with it.

“A good point. A very good point. Now, how are the other students? To the best of your knowledge at least...”

The meeting would go on for some time, with Albus and the Heads of House getting only a bare few hours of sleep before the next morning arrived. Albus himself would get even less sleep than others, as he took the time to send off one last message via methods a bit more esoteric than an owl. He knew what the ritual had been *intended* to do. This version of Riddle had been younger and far less knowledgeable. It had been positively *crude*, in truth. A sloppy ritual meant to sacrifice a mass number of people to empower a wizard or witch.

It was generally also a *bad idea*, with lots of Dark Wizards over the eons having learned the hard way that such methods generally curse you deeply and in ways you can’t escape. The very power robbed from your victims, amplified by the number of them, worked on the world itself to punish you. It was basically the Dark Wizard’s 101 of what *not to do*. Something he was sure even a much younger Tom Riddle would have known.

He’d also always been far cleverer than most, however, and even this mere fragment of him had managed a work around. The Diary had been disintegrating precisely because he’d managed to hack together an addition to the ritual that would transfer all, or at least most, of that curse to *it*. Fully using up the Horcrux, yes, but also allowing his new body to be empowered minus at least the bulk of the downside. It was less clever than the storm and elementals, let alone the Golems, but *those* were actually explained by Hooch having been enthralled.

The woman had dabbled heavily in runes and enchanting, enjoying a hobby of creating her own Brooms and other Quidditch gear. Combined with a younger Tom's potion skills and collection of darker knowledge, and it explained how the various Golems had been created. In point of fact, he was fairly certain Tom had acted before he was properly ready, precisely because Albus's orders for the Heads to investigate the other staff had gotten too close to discovering her. So close that he'd actually suspended Rolanda from acting as referee for matches, using young Harry's complaint as an excuse.

They hadn't acted on the suspicion, mostly because she *wasn't supposed to be back yet*. Her removal by that means had triggered an investigation by the Department of Magical Games and Sports, who took such things quite seriously. With Rolanda not even known to be in the castle, but not having triggered intruder wards as she *was* still keyed to those wards as an instructor, they hadn't had any warning. Likewise, she'd never brought the Dairy into the castle itself, where Lady Hogwarts would almost certainly have noticed it. Kept out on the grounds, the background noise of magic from the Black Lake and Forbidden Forest, both of which were more than a little dark in places, had hidden it.

Absolutely none of that was why he'd sent off his extra message, however.

No, he had a very good idea of what the Ritual had been *supposed* to do. Unfortunately, what he very much *didn't* know was what it had *actually done*. Mr. Potter and Ms. Bell, while both had possessed good instincts that likely saved their lives and many others, had also *added* several dynamic variables to an already sloppy ritual. Young Harry had added not just another entire person to the ritual with all the complication that implied, but high-level nature magic, a wand whose nature had resonated with the storm, and *whatever* Lily Potter protection and Pandora's presence amounted to. Then, just for good measure, Ms. Bell had cut the ritual short. Something that had saved the students from more than a moderate drain on their magic rather than lifeforce, but which would have introduced a cascade failure to an already wildly unstable matrix.

Dumbledore was old and wise enough to know when something was beyond him. Which is why his message was sent out to hopefully summon an expert. Whether or not she would come was yet to be seen...but he didn't think she'd be able to *stay away* from an intriguing case like this, with the way he'd outlined it and the fact that there were *survivors*. Hopefully, she was in a mood to be helpful, rather than testing those survivors to destruction. With Winter mostly over and Spring on the way, she *should* be in a nurturing mood by the time she got his message and came, at least.

Hopefully.

Chapter 37: Waking Up

-Friday, February 24th-

The sense that returned to Harry first this time was so alien that, for what he suspected was long minutes at minimum, he didn't realize he was awake. Even when sound began to filter in again and he began to feel more *aware*, he still thought for a bit longer yet that it was some sort of half-

lucid dream. Or else that he'd eaten something funny and was 'seeing colors' as the telly had said happened to people who took LSD or certain mushrooms.

Even once he began properly deciding he might actually be awake, he didn't know what on earth to make of that first 'sense,' as he had no idea what it was reporting to him at all. It felt like...tingles and waves? The closest he could liken it to a traditional sense was proprioception. A sense of the space around him that was far more *complete* than it should be, but still limited in many ways. He could feel a sort of background static and could almost imagine he saw the outlines of people through his eyelids. Yet he could also feel places where the sense just *stopped*, which was a curious sensation all on its own.

Just to make matters even *worse*, the more coherent he became, the more aware he was of emotions not his own at the edge of his awareness. Two bundles of them, held distinct only by his own Occlumency, which itself had likely been shored up by Pandora. One of the bundles was more subdued than the other, almost as if covered in a blanket, but it was still there, just quieter. The other ebbed and flowed freely, with barely any focus or clarity, which made it all the more alien to a mind that had long ago learned to organize itself.

So distracted by the confusing sets of new sensations was he, that he didn't remember to *open his eyes* until...minutes? Hours? Days? Until quite a decent bit of time had passed, at least.

When he finally did remember to pry his eyelids open, he quickly recognized the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts. Though he wasn't entirely sure how he knew that, since he'd been put in a section cordoned off by cloth dividers ensconced to dampen sound. He supposed the largest reason he was able to identify it anyway was the fact he was not alone, with two other beds in the section containing Katie and Daphne...who were both awake and had been the source of the noise as they chatted quietly with each other.

Notably, they were also the source of the two alien bundles of emotions he was feeling. Something he became instantly aware of the moment he laid eyes on them. Though how he knew he wasn't sure. A moment of thought told him the one from Daphne must be the more controlled and quieter, likely due to the fact she was a halfway-trained Occlumens herself.

Wait. Hold on a second. While that *did* make sense, passing an internal logic check, there was an important chunk of information missing here. Like *how* he was feeling their emotions. Also what the *other* sense was, of course, but honestly that seemed like a less important puzzle than having his girlfriend and...possibly best friend who wasn't Pandora or his girlfriend? Sure, that would do as a labeled for now. How he had his girlfriend and best friend's emotions were just hovering there in the back of his mind!

Something must have alerted the girls to Harry stirring, despite the fact he still hadn't moved, as both of them stopped talking and looked over at him.

"Ah. Prince Charming is finally awake. Katie, if you would summon she-who-must-not-be-named, I can at least try to assure Harry he isn't insane. Though a proper explanation will likely have to wait until after another round of poking and prodding."

Katie had snorted at the name, yet she also quickly slid off her hospital bed. She was notably a bit unsteady, but not too much so, as she moved to poke her head out the curtains and call for...Madam Pomfrey. Who must be 'she-who-must-not-be-named.' He barely had time to consider why one of them hadn't just used their wands to draw attention, when his own appeared hovering in front of his face. He blinked, even as Daphne made a surprised noise.

"Well, unless you did that on purpose, I think one side effect is already apparent."

Okay, that was too much. His arm felt heavy as he moved it, but he managed to grab his wand and shoot an irritated look at Daphne.

"W-wh."

Ah. Attempts to speak one. Failures also one. Thankfully, Daphne seemed to know what he needed, already moving. She seemed a bit less than steady too, but she was steady *enough* to retrieve a glass of water for him, just in time for him to struggle upright enough to take it. She began to talk as he carefully sipped it, now acutely aware that his throat was *dry*. Dry enough that he suspected he'd been out for more than just a few hours.

"Right. So you've been out for just shy of twelve days, with Katie and I having awoken from our extended beauty sleep two days before you. We're still here because there were unknown side effects from the ritual we interrupted. One of which you probably felt already, as the three of us somehow got linked to each other's emotions. I assume you can feel it too?"

Harry nodded, still sipping, throat not quite feeling like it could manage actual words yet. Which, if he'd really been out *twelve days* this time, made a lot of sense.

"Yeah, weird as heck, and I've been trying to get Katie through the basics of Occlumency so she's a bit less...loud. Thankfully, they don't believe it's permanent. Our cores got supercharged with the ritual energy and are still bleeding it off. They expect at least some long-term boost in strength for us, which is nice if it works out. But they also *think* the whole emotion-sharing thing will fade when the last of the ritual overload bleeds out. That could be days, in theory. More likely it will be at least weeks, possibly months. Right now they mostly only have guess work, considering how screwed up the ritual was, but Dumbledore apparently contacted an expert who should arrive in a week or so."

Okay, that was...a lot. Given what he knew about rituals and how stupid it normally was to *interrupt* one, it was far from a terrible result. Though it still begged a major question. Well, several actually, but the one bugging him the most was the one he voiced.

"D-don't suppose you know why I am sensing...waves of something? Like supercharged proprioception?"

Daphne blinked at that, looking completely blank, but didn't have a chance to reply before Madam Pomfrey was abruptly there, wand out.

"Describe this new sense as best you can, Mr. Potter. You got the bulk of the ritual's power, and there were some particularly strange interactions with your wand, which is the only reason you

still *have it*. Do *not* cast anything without approval. Ms. Bell and Ms. Greengrass have been temporarily separated from theirs to enforce that.”

Oh. That explained why neither of the girls had just cast a spell of some sort to get the Healer’s attention. Haltingly, still struggling both with his voice and *finding the words* to describe the sense, Harry did his best to explain it to Pomfrey, even as the woman ran dozens of diagnostics spells over him. Eventually, she seemed satisfied with the results she got, and hummed for a moment to herself.

“Based on your description and some oddities in your diagnostics, which I’ve seen something similar too in those with magical being blood...”

The Matron pointed her wand to a bedpost and cast a spell that *lit up his new sense almost like a flashbulb*. Not quite painful, but...*bright*, for lack of a better word. He flinched in surprise and she quickly canceled the spell.

“Thought so. That spell magnetized the bedpost. I suspect, Mr. Potter, that you’ve gained an electromagnetic sense. Electoreception, or perhaps Magnetoreception. I’ve seen something similar in the odd cases I need to treat the Merpeople in the Black Lake. Normally, they tend to their own, but they’ve occasionally sought help from the Castle with something particularly serious.”

Harry’s mind raced. Electoreception? Like what sharks and whales used? That actually made a *lot* of sense of what he was feeling. The ‘background static’ was likely either the Earth’s magnetic field or, possibly, the still poorly-understood reaction between electricity and magic that he and Professor Sinistra were studying obliquely. Meanwhile, his ability to sense each of the people in the room, including two additional patients beyond the curtains, in the rough outlines of people? Well, *people* had a nervous system and bio-electric field to detect, didn’t they? Even the abrupt fall off in certain directions made sense, as many places in Hogwarts used Expanded Space, and he was likely feeling the edges of such space expansions.

“That...I think that makes sense? Though...how? Wait, no, the ritual involved channeling an artificial storm that was resonating with my wand. Which...”

Harry had put his wand down again, but a mere thought bright it back to hovering next to him again. He eyed it more critically this time, noting that it had changed in more than just responsiveness. The wood was slightly charred. Not in the sense of having *burned*, but the sort of light charring someone did to wood for artistic purposes. The lighter brown maple wood was nearly as dark as the richer walnut, and the walnut had darkened farther as well. Far from feeling damaged, it thrummed in the back of his mind even without touching it, like he’d become far more deeply linked to the wand.

“But that away, Mr. Potter. As I said, there are enough oddities with it we didn’t remove it from your presence, but you will *not* be casting any magic until we have a more complete picture of what is going on. A few days to get a new baseline for you, at minimum. Possibly not until Dumbledore’s expert gets here to check you over. The last thing we want it for the ritual energy still lingering to abruptly explode you into so much strawberry jam because you were reckless.”

Wincing at *that* mental image, Harry *willed* his wand to return to the stand beside his hospital bed. He *felt* fine...well, as fine as he could given he'd been unconscious for twelve days and his body had all sorts of protests about that fact. But he knew enough about rituals, from studying the Transference Ritual as it was taken apart and put back together for him, that he understood there were very real risks with a ritual gone wrong. Which is technically what had happened, even if he'd hesitate to call the *result* wrong. Unless there were some sort of dire consequences he didn't know about yet. Actually, on that point. He still had another Important Thing to ask.

"What happened with the rest of the school? Did anyone..."

He didn't quite know how to ask if anyone had *died* in a way that was tasteful. Thankfully, Daphne could be remarkably blunt with those she was close too, when it came to certain things, and this was apparently one of them.

"No one died, but a lot of people were pretty badly injured. Most of those that needed serious treatment have already returned from St. Mungos, but a handful will be there longer. For long-term treatment of spell damage, mostly. Friendly fire or particularly stupid Ravenclaws trying out experimental spells in a combat situation."

While Madam Pomfrey shot Daphne a somewhat censorious look, she also rather pointedly didn't *correct* her, implying she probably had the same opinion of the Ravenclaws that had tried that. Harry made a note to never admit to *either* of them that he'd done the bastardized Elemental Cascade spell at the end of First Year entirely off the cuff. Admittedly, he'd had Pandora to help with the heavy lifting, but still. Actually, speaking of Pandora...Harry mentally poked her, to make sure she was fine.

"I'm here, Harry. I already reported what I can tell anyone to Pomphrey and Dumbledore. You still haven't told Katie and Daphne about me, so I've been keeping quite since you woke up."

Harry mentally winced at that. There were good reasons he hadn't told them about Pandora, of course. The old saying that three people could keep a secret only if two were dead was entirely too accurate, after all. So far, exactly six people he knew of were aware of her, seven if you counted Lady Hogwarts. But at least three of those were under magical oath, a fourth under medical confidentiality, and a fifth only knew because she had the same secret. Realistically, only Dumbledore was likely to leak the information, and the memories from his mother said the man was notoriously known for keeping secrets even from his closest allies. He was unlikely to leak Pandora's existence very far, if he did so at all.

That said, he'd already been feeling increasingly bad about not sharing the information with his girlfriend. Even with Daphne, he'd begun to feel it a bit, as she grew closer to him while working on the game project. Should he go ahead and reveal it to them now? Given that they were tangled up with this new mess? He sent that question to Pandora, and felt her hesitate.

*"Better not yet, Harry. Katie would probably be fine. Daphne...there's still a chance she'd report it to her father. I represent **multiple** major magical discoveries, after all."*

Reluctantly, Harry had to agree. Though he wasn't entirely certain they'd be able to keep the secret if it really took months to be disentangled from feeling each other's emotional states. Putting a pin in it for now, at least, he focused back on more immediate issues. He was still lacking information. Lots of it, on multiple topics.

"Hooch? The Diary? For that matter, Madam Pomfrey, do we know anything about side effects from the ritual, aside from the obvious?"

The healer frowned, waving away the first two questions before focusing on the third.

"Your friends can fill you in on the first two, at least what is public knowledge. As for the ritual side effects...normally I would speak to your guardians on that sort of thing, more than you. But that's not really relevant in your case, and I understand from Professor Babbling that you've participated in the complete disassembly and reassembly of a ritual already. Given that and...other sources of information you have access too, I suppose it's better for you to know than not. If only so you don't try inexpertly poking at things yourself."

'Other sources' meaning Pandora, of course. The Healer was one of the those aforementioned people that already knew about her. Whether she was expecting Pandora to be able to tell him something based on her connection to Harry's magic or the library of memories she had was a question. He'd take it either way, if it meant getting whatever they already knew.

"Aside from the temporary connection forged between the three of you, which we have little understanding of, the largest effect has been a deepening of your magical capacities. Mostly a strengthening of the core for your two friends, but also a widening of your magical tap, in your case, allowing your core to refill more quickly. I also strongly suspect, but will need more detailed testing to confirm, that you've gained a natural affinity for lightning that resembles what Veela have with fire. Though if that is permeant or not is unknown."

Well, that all sounded remarkably positive so far. Though he had a nasty suspicion he was going to be stuck doing control exercises *again* to adjust to the increased capacity. Sudden surges in strength weren't normal outside of Core Stabilizations, which also came with a control increases from said stabilization to offset them. Something which wouldn't apply here.

"On the less positive side, your companions suffered some magical pathway burns that, thankfully, will heal. Your own rather *unique* pathways were strained as well, but have already recovered due to their resilience. More seriously, being super charged with magic has thrown a few things out of whack. Accelerated metabolism, muscle weakness that should be temporary but might require therapy if it isn't, possible effects on growth, and accidental magical events are likely for a time. Beyond those, we don't know what, if any, long-term effects there will be. Dumbledore has assured everyone that if anyone can figure that part out, it will be the expert set to arrive a week from tomorrow."

Well, there was the other steel-toed boot dropping on a forehead. He'd felt the muscle weakness already, but had hoped it was only the result of being bedridden for nearly two weeks. Given the way both Katie and Daphne had been moving, he supposed he should have known better. The bit about accidental magic was particularly frustrating, as it meant his control would likely be even more shot than he'd been thinking. He was less concerned with the long-term effects on

growth, since Pandora had long ago mastered using his internal magic to smooth such things out. The lack of knowledge on long-term possible problems was annoying, but pretty much expected given the circumstances.

“Thank you. Both for the information, and for the care so far, Madam Pomfrey. Is there anything else immediate?”

The Healer shook her head.

“No. Dumbledore and I will want to examine you with more detailed spells now that you’re awake, but that’s best put off until after hours. You seem stable for the moment and should eat to fuel that metabolism increase I mentioned. I’ll have a house elf bring up food for all three of you, a hearty soup to get you started and something heavier for the girls. I’m sure they can fill you in on what else you’ve missed.”

A moment later, the Mediwitch departed from their little area, with the last thing Harry heard before a muffling charm on the curtains rendered her indistinguishable being her call for a house elf to attend her. He turned his eyes to Daphne and Katie, who were both sitting on Daphne’s bed, it having been the nearer to Harry. This time, it was Katie who spoke up.

“So...uh. Complicated complications, huh?”

She was both looking *and* feeling awkward. Which was, in and of itself, a bit awkward since he could feel those emotions. Thankfully, before the awkwardness could compound on itself, Daphne rolled her eyes and cut through the atmosphere.

“Harry will know when we’re both horny, big deal.”

Both Harry and Katie blinked in shock, taking a moment to process that comment. Then Katie flushed red, radiating embarrassment...and *arousal*. It was mild, but there, and Harry struggled not to focus on it. This was not good for his teenage hormones! This could have *waited* a year or two and it would have been better, thank you very much! Thankfully, unlike Katie, he had plenty of experience with such ‘shocking’ comments from Pandora and managed to keep his cool, firmly redirecting the conversation.

“So, Hooch and the Dairy? Still in the dark here.”

Thankfully, Daphne let them off the hook by allowing the blatant change of topic, despite radiating a certain smug amusement.

“Those are related topics, as it happens. Hooch was apparently *possessed* by the Diary, and had been since the start of the year. Well, halfway possessed, at least. It wasn’t the full thing, apparently. Enough to compel her and change her behaviors. Meaning her malicious actions at that Quidditch match earlier this year were probably part of things, though the Headmaster doesn’t think she was behind the jinxed Bludger. She, or the Diary, had been too careful not to connect her to anything. It’s a bit up in the air about who will be declared at fault, given the circumstances. Particularly as she’s in the long-term spell damage ward at St. Mungos, in pretty rough shape. Though they think she’ll survive at this point, at least.”

Katie nodded at that, seizing on the change in conversational direction.

“Yeah, she caught the worst of the ritual backlash, plus having been half-possessed for months. Apparently, the fact that *whatever you did* targeted the shade controlling her at the end directly, rather than her body, is the only reason she’s alive? Or something like that.”

Huh. He only vaguely understood what had happened at the end there. It was *Pandora* who was tied into his mother’s protection, and it had been her who had guided the strike. In fact, he was only just now processing what that meant, and had *questions* for his companion. That protection had been tuned to *one* magical signature above all others. While it could and did protect him from other things, to an extent, it did so mostly because Pandora could act as an intelligence of sorts for it. Its true purpose was to protect him *specifically* from Voldemort.

The fact that it had acted as it did...

He shook that thought off, as now was *not* the time to be thinking about it. He could and most certainly would interrogate Pandora later for what she knew. Possibly Dumbledore as well. For now, he had plenty of other questions. More than enough to fill the air with.

“Did anyone we know get badly hurt? Do you know how the fighting ended with the elementals, or whatever they were?”

Thankfully, Katie and Daphne quickly proved to be a wealth of information on the more generally-known bits of what had happened. Including, in Daphne’s case, some details on what the backlash in the greater wizarding world was like. By the time their food arrived a few minutes later, they were well into catching Harry up on what they’d learned since waking up themselves. The conversation would go on for some time, awkwardness mostly forgotten...for the moment.

Chapter 38: Catching Up and Awkward Moments

-March 2nd-

Thankfully for all three of their sanity, Dumbledore had overridden Madam Pomfrey’s desire to keep them chained to hospital beds until the ritual expert arrived. It had still taken over two additional days of observation for Katie and Daphne to be allowed to attempt magic, and Harry hadn’t been allowed until the day after that. But once all three of them had proven they weren’t going to violently explode and had *decent* control over their magic, they had been allowed to leave the Hospital Wing.

Given how far ahead Harry was, and Daphne being near the top of their year as well, those three days had *mostly* gotten them caught up on missed work. Between the trio, only Katie was still struggling a bit in that regard. While she was absolutely no slouch, her interests were a bit narrower *and* she was a year ahead of them, meaning she had a trio of electives. Specifically, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, the two *hardest* electives offered at Hogwarts, plus Care of Magical Creatures which was thankfully a bit more easy going. Her work with Harry and family history meant she was handling the two harder subjects well despite the disruption. But, despite it being the more easy-going class, Care of Magical Creatures in particular was actually somewhat hard to catch up on, Mostly, obvious in retrospect, due to missed practical demonstrations.

It also didn't help that, after leaving the Hospital Wing, they had discovered another complication. Due, as far as anyone could tell, to the same lingering ritual connection that was causing the emotional spillovers between them, they could not get too far apart from one another without experiencing dangerous loss of magical control. This had complicated sleeping arrangements, as the Slytherin and Gryffindor dorms were about as far apart as it was physically possible to get within the castle. For the time being, this had resulted in them being moved into a set of guest suites next to each other...with charms cast by overly suspicious professors put on the doors to prevent them from visiting each other in them.

This had also caused their class schedules to be thrown for a loop, of course. Harry's had already been a mess due to having been advanced a year in Charms and Transfiguration, plus having individual instruction from three different professors. The solution was messy and frustrating for all three of them, though Daphne was the least annoyed. Mostly as much of the fundamental solution had been to shove them into Katie's third year classes together. Given Daphne had pretty well mastered the 2nd year material, she was benefiting from the more advanced lectures, particularly as Harry could easily help her with the Charms and Transfiguration theory work. The fact that *Daphne* was particularly advanced in both Herbology and Potions to return the favor, and that *all three* of them were honestly beyond 3^d year material for defense, made it all work...somehow and somewhat.

Trying to sort it all out and get any semblance of normality going had kept them hopping for the first few days out of the Hospital Wing. Which, fortunately or unfortunately, hadn't kept a few awkward revelations from creeping in as well. The biggest was that Daphne had been *correct* in her bluntly teasing observation that they would be able to tell when the other two were...interested in certain things. All three of them were teenagers, with the active sex drives that implied, and two of them were dating.

Which actually hadn't been the awkward revelation.

Oh, certainly, it *had* been awkward to realize when one of the others really would have preferred some 'alone time.' Yet they'd been kept busy enough and were aware enough of the problem that it hadn't gotten *too* horribly awkward yet. No, the bigger revelation which had caused *Katie and Harry* in particular some uncertain awkwardness, was the fact *neither* could hide the little detail that they both found *Daphne* attractive. It was a very awkward place for a dating couple to find common ground on. Actively *not* helped by the fact that Daphne both didn't mind and had taken to *deliberately and intentionally teasing* both of them.

Not maliciously, nor overtly, which meant they couldn't call her out on it. But her outfit choices and some regular poses that *had* to be deliberate were more than enough to increase the awkwardness that they had yet to speak of, even if they were stuck in a 'I know you know that I know and we both know she knows and we know that she knows we both know' situation. Something even *farther* complicated by the fact Daphne herself had clear interest in *both of them*, though far more strongly in Harry than Katie.

Which is why, the first time they post-Hospital Wing that they managed to get free to work on their tabletop gaming project in Harry's workshop, Katie and Harry were surprised that Daphne just flat out brought it up.

“Alright. I’m not going to be responsible for causing you two relationship problems, so we’re getting this out in the open before one of you explodes under the pressure and does something silly. You,” Daphne stabbed a finger at Katie, causing her to jump a bit, “are just as bi-curious as I am. You don’t know if you’re actively into women, but you can certainly appreciate a nice arse, and mine is *fantastic*. Thanks for noticing.”

Katie *gaped*, too stunned even to react with embarrassment that would no doubt catch up quickly. Daphne, however, wasn’t done yet and jabbed a finger at Harry next, who at least had Occlumency to help keep his own reaction to the unexpected assault a bit less...obvious.

“You actually have more of a thing for boobs than arses, but I have pretty nice tits too. Also thanks for noticing.”

On the surface, Daphne seemed not the slightest bit bothered by this chain of events...but her emotions weren’t *quite* controlled enough to hide the fact she was riding more than a hint of nervousness and just burying it under mental control. Nervousness that spiked as she matter-of-factly pointed at herself next.

“I, meanwhile, was already attracted enough to Harry that I was disappointed Katie got to you first. But wasn’t so besotted that I wasn’t happy for *both of you*. Also, by the by, I share Harry’s fascination with boobs. They are very nice to look at, and while yours aren’t huge, Bell, they are very nicely perky and fitted for your body. You have a fantastic arse as well. Though not, of course, as nice as mine. Which is a *work of art* all should pay respects too.”

Katie *snorted*, despite having now gotten over the shock, a blush on her face. A light blush, surprisingly, the sheer bluntness of getting it all out in the open like this the way Daphne was apparently actually helping her.

“Frankly, none of this really bothers me, since I was already aware of it. I’m apparently far better at reading body language than either of you are. *You two*, however, are clearly feeling awkward over it, so we’re going to properly clear the air. I find both of you hot, and would happily date Harry or experiment with Katie to find out if it’s more than curiosity, were either of you single. Also, Harry just barely managed not to pop a boner at that mental image, which we all know is perfectly normal when a teenage male gets a mental image of his two hot friends with their tongues down each other’s throats and hands doing kinky things in which clothing might not be involved.”

Harry spluttered a bit at that, even his Occlumantic control failing at being called out...*accurately*...at that. Daphne just kept steamrolling right along.

“It *shouldn’t* bother either of you, either. Since the only way I’m planning to get between you two is if it’s as part of a threesome, or you break up. Meanwhile, you now know for *sure* that you both have the hots for each other, and I’m pretty bloody confident you care for each other deeply enough to *almost* call it more than puppy love. Though I’m hardly an expert on matters of the heart.”

That...actually struck as deep as anything else, with Harry and Katie flushing a bit as the snuck glances at each other. It had *mostly* been lost in the awkwardness, but neither of them had been quite oblivious enough not to notice that they both felt something more than just affection for

each other. Though neither of them could say if it was romantic love either, as they weren't any greater experts on the subject than Daphne was.

"Point is. Being super awkward about this is only going to cause things to fester the longer we leave it, and you two are cute together. I think you'd be even cuter with me added to the mix, but while we're all tied together by the ritual isn't the right time to make a decision like that. It's out there, you're aware, we can all think about it without fear of reprisal since I brought it up and just felt the spikes of *interest* in the idea from *both of you*."

That got another blush and both Katie and Harry looking towards opposite walls, which only made Daphne snort.

"Right. So, air cleared. No need to be half as awkward about this. We're all hot teenagers with sex drives. You can stare at my glorious arse all you want and I'm absolutely going to enjoy looking at both of yours. We can talk about anything more complicated than when to arrange an independent but mutual masturbation session *after* the ritual clears out."

When both of their gazes snapped to her face, she gave them both a Cheshire grin.

"What? You think I'm going to wait *months* on that? I prefer once a *day*, thanks. Even if it's only weeks, not months, I'm certainly not waiting that long. Still, we can discuss that later, once you've stopped freaking out. Now, come along you two, we have work to get to and you have an arse to stare at, since I made sure to wear the leather pants you both love to see me in."

Daphne spun around to *saunter* to the worktable, where she proceeded to lean over it in such a way to put the repeatedly mentioned arse on display. The fact that *she* felt a spike of arousal at the action did not help in the least bit in reigning in the blushes on both of her companion's faces...

... ..

-March 4th-

"Well now, you three are already so interesting looking that I just want to pull you apart, then remake you new and happy!"

Harry, Katie and Daphne *stared* as the beautiful...woman? Certainly a female presenting entity, though very obviously not entirely human, anyway. They stared as the beautiful being made that rather disturbing comment. Dumbledore cleared his throat, and the silvery-gold-haired woman with rich brown skin, the color of which seemed eerily reminiscent of something to Harry's mind, flinched.

"Right, right! Sorry, little ones, there is still a little bit of Winter in my roots yet, even if things are turning towards Spring! I'm afraid if you wanted me at my most harmless, you'd have needed to save your disaster for a few more weeks!"

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was Pandora who finally realized just who, or perhaps *what* they were seeing. The memories came, as they often did with the esoteric, from the donations of Euphemia Potter, and she pushed them toward Harry's mind. He jumped a little, even if he couldn't exactly 'download' them, he got the gist and made a few connections. Particularly in identifying just

exactly where he'd seen that the color of her skin before. It was a *very* near match for the walnut color in his wand before it had been 'charred' by the ritual.

"Oh! You're a nature spirit? Wait, how are you *here*?"

The woman, who had been introduced to them as 'Isabella Goldberry,' brightened and focused on Harry the instant his surprise made the words slip.

"How delightful! You didn't mention one of them was a student of nature, Dumbles! Oohhh, he positively smells of lightning, so I didn't noticed it, but there's hints of druid tinting in his magic! I haven't seen that in a long time. Hmm, when was it last...perhaps Gimdel? I last saw him in 1850 something? Or was it the 1860s? Oh, I'm almost sure it was 1861, since those idiots had just all started shooting at each other and ruining so many perfectly good trees for *cookfires*! Hmpfh. Wait...hmmm, has it really been so long? You really must teach the young ones more types of *proper* magic, Dumbles!"

The staring continued as the petite woman who just identified herself as likely being *multiple-centuries old*, actually scolded a half-amused, half-sheepish looking Headmaster Dumbledore. She even shook a finger at him, and her hair *shifted like leaves* as she did so. An illusion, possibly, as it seemed to be perfectly ordinary hair again when they blinked.

"Ah, my dear Isabella, I'm afraid young minds normally have only so much space to learn things, and I only so much time to teach them. Young Mister Potter is quite an oddity, who has taken to studying his grandmother's works. Euphemia, apparently, dabbled in both druidic and shamanistic nature magic more than a bit."

'Isabella's' head cocked at that, seemingly caught on something Dumbledore had said. This time it *definitely* wasn't an illusion when her hair momentarily shifted colors nearer to gold, before fading again back toward an ashen-silver shot through with just *hints* of that gold.

"Oh! Oh! I remember her, I think! Why, she attended Burning Man! The magical one, not that crude muggle knock off, of course. That was back in...hmmm...maybe it was back in the 1930s? She was enough of an oddity to stand out. A pale British lady with such a neat accent willing to do the proper skylad dances if we'd share a little bit about Shaman magic with her! She had a *very nice* sway to her hips!"

Harry wasn't sure if he should be mortified or amused by the anecdote about his grandmother, particularly when Pandora mentally nodded along, confirming she really had done that. Dumbledore certainly looked amused at the thought, though he chided their 'expert on rituals' a moment later.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised if she visited, Isebella. But I do believe you have a ritual, or rather failed results of a disrupted one, to study?"

The woman blinked, then whirled back at them, pointing dramatically.

"Right! Oh, and a question to answer, too! I'm only a half-spirit, grandson of great hips! Which means I can be away from my tree quite a bit more than my full-blooded kin are able! At least so long as I make arrangements for one of my cousins to look after it for me!"

The woman half-pranced, half-glided first toward, then around them, staring intently all the while. Somehow, Harry got the feeling she was seeing *far* more than mere mage sight would allow.

“Oh, oh, who’s this with you! Not a possession, but...”

Before Harry could react, Goldberry had jabbed a finger at him, touching his scar...and Pandora’s sprite form popped out without either of them willing it.

“Oh my! Something new! I’ve never seen something like you before, and that doesn’t happen very often when you reach four hundred and forty-three!”

Kaite and Daphne were staring in surprise just as much at *Pandora* as they were at *Goldberry* now, and Harry groaned, kicking himself for not introducing them sooner. Now he’d have to deal with hurt feelings, if they took it the wrong way.

“Ah, this is Pandora. She’s a, well, a creation of my mother and another brilliant witch. An artificial intelligence that...”

Goldberry shook her head.

“Nope! Not anymore! She might have started out artificial, but she’s picked up way too much life force by now! She’s a spirit, like me, only you’re her tree! That is *fascinating*! I want to study it! But oh, we should look at that ritual first. It’s all kinds of messing with both your and her magic, after all. Wouldn’t want it to hurt her when we can still untangle it and put it to a proper use! Now come, we need to do a proper *seeing* with the three of you. Ohhhh, maybe we can do it Skyclad! I bet you look just as good as your grandmother did, if in different ways!”

Harry was far too stunned by the revelation about Pandora to resist, as he was pulled into the whirlwind of a chaotic energy that was Isabella Goldberry and her determination to ‘learn all about you four and you’re interesting magics’...

... ..

-March 9th-

“Well, this has been an *experience*, and it’s not even over yet. I don’t suppose either of you have any idea what to do or say about Lady Goldberry’s different options, do you?”

It was Daphne that had voiced the question, a mix of exhaustion and plaintive confusion in her voice that both of her listeners *deeply* sympathized with. Isabella Goldberry was a bit...much. According to Dumbledore, that was partly because she was in the middle of a ‘seasonal shift’ from Winter to Spring. Apparently, according to him, her half-manic nature would level out a bit near the first day of Spring, though he admitted she’d likely have *even more* energy after that. It would just be more *focused* than the near bi-polar splits she’d had, which had necessitated Dumbledore being nearby to prevent her from getting ‘distracted’ and ‘disassembling one of them to see how everything ticked faster!’

The *bright side*, rather than the potentially *horrifying* side, was that the woman was exactly what Dumbledore had claimed she was. An expert. Beyond a mere expert, actually, with a particular interest in rituals and a stupidly deep understanding of Nature Magic in particular. The

memory of Tom Riddle had leaned heavily on a crude form of nature manipulation for the ritual. Something only possible with his half-ersatz knowledge Hogwarts sat atop the junction of a trio of leylines, providing raw power to compensate for insufficient skills. That nature manipulation component meant that Goldberry's extra crossover expertise had only doubled down on how useful she was to sort out what was going on with the aftermath.

The answer, as honestly somewhat expected, was a 'hot mess,' in Lady Goldberry's tart words.

It wasn't, surprisingly, actually as bad as it could have been, even if you discounted the high probability of them simply dying. Apparently, the fact that Harry had been at the center of the ritual and instinctively drew most of its power through the thunderbird tailfeather of his wand had made a *huge* difference. Again, starting with the whole fact that it *hadn't killed him*. Which, Lady Goldberry had *repeatedly* emphasized, should really have been the most likely result of what Harry had tried.

Instead, with at least a *focus*, the results of ritual might still be a tangled up mess, but it wasn't actively detrimental...yet.

Unfortunately, it *was* unstable. Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore had been quite correct that the ritual energy was slowly bleeding out and being able to sense each other's emotions would go away when it finished. What they *hadn't* realized was that the emotional sensing was a result of the ritual *still being active*. According to Lady Goldberry, when enough energy bled out of it entirely, the still active ritual would *snap*. Which, if they didn't do anything at all beforehand, would seriously damage all three of their magical cores. Not beyond recovery, but to the point they'd likely be stuck unable to use magic for *months*, and needing a year or more of therapy after that point besides, with a high likelihood if it never fully recovering to a hundred percent.

Obviously, that was not on the table as an option.

This meant that what they needed to do was *finish* the ritual in some way. Which would normally be a neigh impossible task...and with Lady Goldberry's help, instead became not only possible, but a task with *options*. They could actively choose from a number of different results, all with pros and cons, and they had only until the next New Moon to do so. Which, as luck would have it, wasn't until March 30th. So they at least had time to think about it and talk it over, but only a couple of weeks, with the last being needed to make proper preparations. The trouble, of course, was that it needed to be a *mutual* decision, since they couldn't do multiple results for different people. One ritual, one result, three people.

"Well, I think we can all agree that simply solidifying the emotion-sharing is probably a bad idea. Yes, it's kinda neat in some ways, and if we were all married it would probably do great things for...communication or something. We aren't, and I doubt it's really healthy for us in the long term, even if we've been doing okay with it."

Daphne snorted at Harry's observation, but declined to bring up what 'doing okay' meant. She'd tease him about that later, given certain arrangements he had certainly enjoyed, at least from the feel of his emotions at the time. For now, they had a more serious topic to discuss.

“That leaves us with three options, then. Personally, I think the most interesting is linking in that personal realm of Pandora’s that would let her travel between us. The way you describe it is like some of the muggleborn fantasies about Occlumency, rather than the truth of how that art properly works.”

Katie nodded from where she was lounging on a couch they transfigured in the workroom, looking less *done* than Daphne or Harry. But then, she was the most extroverted of the three of them. She’d handled Lady Goldberry better than either of them as a result, seemingly amused at their difficulties with the half-inhuman woman’s...everything.

“That’s a neat option, but it might have some of the same issues long-term as the emotion sharing. It would only actually *function* when we were within a few kilometers of Harry, and later on in life, if we go our separate ways for whatever reason? Or heck, even just over the summers? It wouldn’t have any real benefits, though it wouldn’t hurt anything either.”

That was true, of course. Though from the expression on Daphne’s face, she didn’t consider it enough of a downside. Then again, Pandora was possibly the most advanced use of *Charms* that had ever existed, given that she’d eventually gained *life* somehow. Which was a revelation he and Pandora were still struggling a bit with. Given advanced Charms were pretty much Daphne’s favorite thing, when it came to magic at least, it was perhaps understandable that she’d be *very interested*, even if she might lose access to her in a few years.

Harry hummed and decided to put in his two shillings.

“Personally, I liked her idea of tying it to the Animagus process. Her theory that it could result in a *magical* Animagus form is extremely interesting. There have only been a handful of recorded cases of magical Animagi forms in recorded history, and dramatically increasing the chances we end up with them from the process? That could be *very* worthwhile.”

Daphne, of course, was the one to bring up the downside. It wasn’t that she was uninterested, from what he could feel of her emotions, but...

“Sure, but that has the lowest certainty of payoff. It’s only an *increased chance*, not a certainty. Which doesn’t even cover that the process is dangerous to attempt before your second core stabilization. Admittedly, Katie and I have already had ours, so you’re the one lagging there, oh youthful one. But it will still probably mean waiting until next year before we could convince anyone to let us make the attempt. Even then it might be a hard sell with us underage.”

Harry nodded at that, though he had *options* there...possibly. The Ministry and Courts had tried *hard* to drag out Sirius’s legal trouble. He was, however, due for his much-delayed day in court next month. Derke Cadewell had become increasingly confident in his letters to Harry that Sirius was going to get off, as Remus’s help had turned up a number of useful leads and bits of information. Sirius’s own surprisingly solid mental state when they’d finally pried him from Azkaban, for transfer into a Ministry Holding Cell, had only increased that confidence.

Katie spoke up next, in doing so presenting the full picture of this issue, as she did so in favor of a *third* option that Lady Goldberry had provided.

“I mean, the obvious choice if we look at it objectively is the Boosting Ritual. Admittedly, you already have an elemental alignment Har, but Daphne and I getting our own would be nice. Not to mention Goldberry said actually learning to tap them would provide increased magical senses, like Harry is getting with the electroreception stuff. Possibly even other boosts, too, over time, if we train with using nature magic.”

It was by far the tamest of the three major options, one that would have benefits pretty much no matter what. Even attuning an element at all would give someone increased natural physical and magical recovery. Harry had, with Goldberry’s advice, already attuned ‘Air’ as the overarching element of lightning, and had noticed the effects already. He needed less sleep and was pretty sure his reflexes were sharper.

Of course, the fact he’d *already* attuned himself to an element, and would likely soon manage the lightning sub-element, meant he might not get anything at all out of the tame choice. He still *might*, Goldberry had said there was a decent chance it would either deepen his attunement or even help him attune a second element. But it was very much a ‘might,’ rather than the certainty of the advantages Katie and Daphne would get. Katie, in particular, would almost certainly benefit. She’d been surprised to discover her natural element was ‘Earth,’ and being attuned to it would undoubtedly make a number of magical crafting disciplines far easier for her to learn.

“Well, we obviously all have our favorite option, now don’t we? I suppose now is the time to debate the merits, favor trade, or possibly duel to the death over them, correct?”

Katie and Harry snorted at Daphne’s dry delivery of that question. Still, there was an element of truth to it. They *did* need to decide which option they should go with. Which meant mustering their case for their respective preferred choice and debating with the other two. All three of them fell silent as they began working to themselves on doing just that...

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