

Harry Potter: Pandora's Box

(Chapters 34-35)

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 34: Calm Before the Storm

-January 10th-

Pandora wondered, from time to time, if Harry realized just how much he'd already shifted the Magical World. It was something that was on display now, as she used a bit of her own magic to focus out over The Courtyard, a basic name that had somehow stuck for the area Hogwarts now had shops set up. Harry himself was busy paying attention to Katie, both of them animatedly going over various ideas for their new project, in what was basically a quasi-date. The pair were adorable together, and Pandora was personally rooting for Katie to be the first member of Harry's Harem. Something she was still determined to make happen. Her Harry deserved it, after all.

The very café they sat in was testament to the changes Harry had already induced, all the more telling as he hadn't even been directly involved. The Hogwarts Café was honestly pretty nice if, much like The Courtyard, not exactly the most originally named. As might be expected, given that Hufflepuff House as a whole were its sponsors, the café was cozy. Soft-toned wooden tables filled both floors, some on the first floor large enough to seat groups of up to eight. On the second, where they were currently at, smaller and more intimate tables for two or three lined both the back wall and the window that overlooked the courtyard. Plant life, predictably given who the head of Hufflepuff House was, was subtly scattered around, filling the air with a rich sent of life that complimented the aroma of good food.

Of the new shops arrange around what had once been a melee weapons training courtyard, the café was by far the largest, actually making use of space expansion to have those two floors, as the buildings around the original training Courtyard hadn't been multistory. Students were both running the place, as well as making up all the clientele, and it was a rare afternoon where the café wasn't at least half full. Personally, Pandora thought the enchanted windows of the second floor were a nice touch, as they let you look out over the rest of the businesses and people watch, despite the expansion charms.

There were six of those businesses now, two more having been approved since the start of the year. The first new addition was a small news stand/fiction bookshop, which provided various magazines, journals, and news publications, along with a decent selection of both muggle and magical fiction. Things that the famous Hogwarts library lacked, and which a great many teenagers were interested in. The second new addition was far more ambitious, a clothing shop that had been put together by a number of budding fashionistas. It was hardly going to be competing with Twilfitt

and Tatting's anytime soon, but the shop *did* cater to 'teen styles' that were legitimately a bit hard to find in the Wizarding World. Many of them had been adapted, it had to be said, from mundane fashions, though usually with a twist or three.

Magical Goth was proving popular with some students, which amused Pandora. Admittedly, it did look pretty amazing when you could use magic to get complex dye patterns, or even add animated decoration. Personally, Pandora was more a fan of what someone had dubbed 'Magic Pixie Dream Girl' fashion. A style which included a riot of wildly mixed bright colors, often including hair coloring charms, and matched well with those possessed of sunny or slightly manic personalities. Several of the professors obviously disapproved, but couldn't keep the students from wearing the style when not in class. Of course, they *might* have managed to institute a rule against it...if Dumbledore wasn't a huge fan of the outrageousness, cheerfully commissioning some new eye-ball searing robes and even a *suit* from the shop.

All of this had been kicked off, albeit unintentionally, by Harry breaking the mold.

The fact that many of the clothing styles had obviously been inspired by the movies shown in the theaters was only the obvious part. The fact that he'd introduced a new paradigm for the students with *creating something for them to do* inside Hogwarts was a far larger piece of the greater puzzle. Ambitious students were making money with the business, less ambitious ones were *still* making money by picking up paid shifts working, and of course students were spending that money as well. Either their own, or allowances provided by their parents. An entire new internal economy based on injecting more entertainment of various kinds into an environment that had previously been stagnant.

Which, of course, wasn't even taking into account the things that were going to be spreading beyond Hogwarts and making an ever-larger impact. Memory Projectors, the home-theater kits to go with them, calculators. Harry was only a fourteen-year-old second year and he was causing waves that were going to erode foundations of several entire industries. Something that would only grow more radical as he kept introducing more and more of the ideas that Pandora herself had enthusiastically helped him come up with.

Pandora was proud.

She was also, however, glad that his next couple of projects likely wouldn't upset the applecart farther just yet. From the many donor memories she had, she knew that Wizards and Witches didn't always react to change very well. So far, despite their impact, the changes Harry had made weren't likely to stir up too much trouble. Doubly so since he's partnered with renowned experts to bring the public bits to market. If he'd *kept* pouring them on too fast, that might well have changed. A wizarding version of a cell phone, for example, would actively disrupt an *existing* market in the Floo Network, instead of creating an entirely new market.

Thankfully, the new game he and Katie were currently discussing, despite its possible other uses beyond being a game, wasn't going to push that envelope. Likewise, even if their eventual entry into the competition for a new Hogwarts Express design *won*, they would be actively working within the accepted framework of society. The Express was a tradition, and the selection

committee would be responsible for the end product being *different*. Hopefully, between the two, the spreading changes would have time to settle before Harry pushed for more.

She would *never* try to drag him down, even to protect him, but *managing* the speed of change a bit was something she'd try to encourage. Once he was older, he'd be able to handle the backlash better, doubly so if he had his harem backing him up! But for now...best to encourage a few less dramatic shifts that would still benefit him and everyone else. Hmmm, she'd have to remind him to bring Daphne into this project. Getting her invested in him would be a great help in the long run, since the Greengrass family was neutral but reasonably influential.

Besides, she was a *great* second candidate for Harry's Harem!

... ..

-January 12th-

"You want to repurpose the display arrays from the calculator? Well, I suppose they *are* yours, legally, since you hired a journeyman to create them for you. It's a bit of an advanced project, admittedly. For anyone else your age or level of experience, I'd say you might be biting off more than you can chew at this point. But since you are not, in fact, anyone else, I suppose we can dissect it. Though I'm only helping you with the basics, of course. The rest will be up to you."

Harry smiled, entirely pleased with Babblings agreement. He only got so many hours a week with each of the three Professors who had taken him on as a personal student. Thankfully, both Babbling and Sinistra were very free-form with the structure of their lessons. With Professor Sinistra, that was because more than half of their time was spent delving into completely new territory, and the older woman tended to treat Harry almost as much as a research partner and peer as she did a student. With Professor Babbling, though, it was more the nature of the subject itself.

Runes, at least at the point you began to practically apply them, were as much an art as a science. Not that there *weren't* rules, of course. However, as you needed to impart the specific intent you meant for each rune and runeword into an array as you carved it, you couldn't just copy it out of a book. Not with Futhark at least. There *were* more complex runic languages that had far more specific meanings for every rune, but such languages were horrifically complex to learn. As a result of Futhark runes having multiple *possible* meanings, it was an easier language to learn...but generally the best form of instruction for it was to give a task and then challenge the student to apply runes to solving it. That, however, was what Babbling would have done in a *classroom*, where she needed to watch a dozen or more students at once.

As a *personal* student, more or less an apprentice even, she was much more inclined to let Harry pick his own projects. She would then work with him to outline the loose ideas needed, force him to write it all out in runes on a sand table, and only *then* let him start carving and adding the 'intent' portion to the runes and runewords. Of course, reverse-engineering was also a serious part of what you needed to learn, as taking apart the work of someone more experienced to figure out 'how it ticked' was one of the best ways to understand the process. Normally, Bathsheda supplied the projects to work backwards from, with Harry picking them apart, when they worked on this sort of thing.

Harry had taken the chance to ask about taking apart the runic display and input system that the Journeyman he'd hired had created for the Arithmancy Calculators instead. The professor was obviously taken aback, but equally obviously hardly against it. Which was *great*, as it was frankly giving Harry a headache to try and sort it out alone, and he had *ideas* for how to use it for his other current projects once he properly understood it.

"Thanks Professor! I was impressed by the work from the moment I saw it, and I can see a lot of other applications!"

Bathsheda Babbling's own expression twitched, seemingly to instinctively know he had *plans* from the sharp look in her eyes. Thankfully, she was obviously mostly curious, rather than judgmental. She'd already seen the results of him having *plans*, after all, and so far it had only had positive results.

"I admit, I thought the work was interesting myself, though I noted several inefficiencies and corrected them in the final version of the calculator that I made over the summer. As such, I think we'll make this a two-part challenge. I will help you break down the original version, then *you* have to try and make a version that is as good, or better, than what I came up with. We will not proceed to another project until I'm satisfied."

Harry winced, knowing how high her standards could be. Still, it would be worth it, given how useful he believed it could be for *many* projects in the future...

... ..

-January 17th-

Despite everything still unresolved with the various attacks, Harry was in a good mood as Daphne joined him and Katie in his workroom. They powers that be might still be incompetent so far, having failed to figure out who could *enchant an entire locomotive* without being spotted, and classes might also still be boring for him. That was all true. But the last few days of spit balling ideas with Katie about how to make a Wizarding Tabletop Game had been fun. Hopefully Dumbledore or the Aurors had *some* leads from either the Gingerbread War or the Hogwarts Express Golem, so it wasn't like *he* needed to be involved in trying to figure out what the fuck was going on. No, he'd added more wards to his workroom and dorm just in case, and would leave the problems up to others to solve. For now, he had a ravenette Charms prodigy to convince his newest idea was a good one.

"Why am I looking at a table full of miniature monsters and witches? Are you two trying to break into the souvenir business?"

Daphne's arched eyebrow and dry tone told everyone present that she didn't suspect them of anything so foolish, but also wasn't willing to waste her time on nonsense. *How* she conveyed that much with so little, Harry wasn't quite sure. As for who else was present, there was an extra addition beyond Harry, Katie, and the unseen Pandora. Well, technically *two* extra additions, since the first had a hidden extra of her own. Specifically, it was Luna Lovegood that they'd roped in even before Daphne, with blonde looking unbothered as she focused on making another miniature, biting her tongue in a somewhat ridiculous, yet undeniably adorable, expression as she worked.

Katie and Harry had brought Luna in when they'd realized they had a bit of an issue. Specifically, that neither of them were particularly artistic. Certainly, magic overcame that problem *to an extent*, by letting you transfigure more on visualization than artistic talent. Even that, however, assumed you could visualize your desired end goal with considerable precision. Which was fine for simple figures or a few conjurations that you were extremely familiar with, but not so much for making *dozens* of different, highly detailed figurines.

It was Harry that had hit on a possible solution by remembering that Luna was both *extremely* interested in magizoology and quite advanced, spell-wise, for her age. The choice had turned out to be an inspired one when Luna had lit up with pure happiness at the idea of making figurines of dozens of magical creatures, both real and imaginary. She hadn't known the right spells for sculpting yet, but had learned them quite easily...and had quickly proven that she had *all* the artistic talent. The figurines she was producing were legitimately better than the officially licensed mundane products that the Weasleys and Daphne were working with for their shop, in point of fact. Something Harry was quite sure Daphne had noticed, with the sharp eye she was giving Luna.

"Nothing quite so simple, no. We're working on an entirely new product here. One we hope will compete with both existing wizarding *games*, and collectables markets like Chocolate Frogs."

Daphne made a skeptical humming noise, but Harry knew better. He had her full attention. In part, he knew, due to the fact he had a significant success record behind him already. Smirking, he moved to the side of the table that Luna wasn't currently using and pulled the cloth off what was, at first glance, a simple board of small squares. While not dissimilar to a chessboard, it was considerably larger and not colored. It also, at *second* glance, had a number of rune clusters carved into it in various places.

"Technically, the game ruleset we are working on can be used with any surface you can draw squares on. The board is sort of a premium addition that will be a bit more pricey, but I felt giving you a better idea of the scope we're thinking of is required."

Harry tapped one cluster of runes with his wand...and a half-transparent field of blank white covered the squares. It was an adaptation of the work the Journeyman he'd hired for the holographic display of his calculator project had done, and which he'd been dissecting with Professor Babbling. It was simplified greatly, in this case, since it didn't need to be quite as interactive, then added onto with some of the work Harry had done with the Memory Projector. Grabbing a small disc from a row next to the board, Harry slotted it into a matching sunken circle in the board with a flourish.

Daphne, visibly unimpressed up to this point, abruptly gawked at the result.

Said result was that blank white display shifting to show a detailed depiction of a dungeon labyrinth, complete with raised bits of furniture and other props. Despite the scenery, the display remained *just* transparent enough to see the dark lines of the squares carved into the board through it. He wasn't going to mention it *just yet*, but this was by far the most 'complete' of the discs. Most of the others currently only had basic outdoor terrain. Things like a forest, grassy field, or an icy tundra. He'd put extra effort into *this one specifically* for their sales pitch to Daphne.

"This is the playboard, while..."

Harry reached to pluck a completed pair of figurines from the batch. One Monster and one ‘player.’

“These are intended to be both your enemy,” he placed the figure of a troll down on the board, “and your own representation,” this time he placed an attractive witch figurine onto the board. “The game, which we are tentatively calling *A Magical Adventure*, is intended to allow you to play as an adventuring witch or wizard. One who explores dungeons, catacombs, enchanted forests, and so on, looking for ancient knowledge or treasures.”

Daphne was no fool, and she was eyeing the board critically but with visible appreciation at this point. What she *said*, however, completely threw Harry for a loop.

“You’re making magical Dungeons & Dragons, except adjusted for how real magic and monsters work.”

Blinking in *complete* surprise that Daphne Greengrass, of all people, knew what Dungeons and Dragons was, Harry was admittedly caught flat-footed. Daphne was clearly amused by that fact, smirking as she explained.

“Tracey’s a half-blood, and her father is a *complete* dork. When he found out magic was real, he inflicted Dungeons and Dragons on *everyone* in the family, even guests. It can, admittedly, be quite fun to play...and I *may* have originally gotten into animation charms because I wanted to animate some of the little figurines he had.”

The ravenette said it was such utter nonchalance that Harry was properly gobsmacked. His expression must have been particularly funny, as Katie began snickering helplessly. Shaking himself, he sheepishly tried to recover.

“Ah...well, that makes this simpler to pitch, I guess? Yes, that’s essentially what we are doing. Though we’re intending to make it accurate enough that it can also double as an educational tool of sorts. For things like Defense class or Flitwick’s training programming. Even if it ends up not catching on with the public, which I think it has a serious chance of doing, it will still be useful, I think.”

It was *Daphne’s* turn to look surprised, then considering, as she looked at the board.

“Huh, I hadn’t considered that aspect. I know there *are* some ‘war game’ style muggle tabletop games, even if Tracey’s dad isn’t into those as much. I suppose it actually *would* be a good way to represent and walk through various tactics, wouldn’t it?”

Visibly considering that for a moment, Daphne eventually nodded.

“I’m guessing you want me on board to animate the figurines? You realize that the animation is going to be *complex*, at least if you want them to interact with each other. Not that I’m against it, as it seems like both a challenging project and one that might be a good business direction. But understand it won’t be a *short* project. Likely even just making a base set for testing could take months of part-time work with the hours I can spare. I *do* need to work at my current business too, you know.”

Harry nodded, a pleased smile on his face.

“That’s completely fine. I still have other ongoing projects of my own, after all, so this isn’t something I can commit to full-time. Likewise, Katie has shifts in the branch of her family shop open in The Courtyard now. This is intended as a longer-term project, one I think it will be fantastic for stretching my runic workings muscles on, as the board will also end up being fairly complex. I’m intending for this one to be a ‘basic’ model, with fancier and more expensive ones having quite a few more features. This, really, would end up being an entire collectable gaming line, if it works out.”

Daphne pursed her lips, then nodded.

“Alright, Potter. I will at least hear you out. If you have a good enough basic idea of how games like this need to work, and I think your rule adaptations are viable, I’ll consider going into business with you on this. I assume Bell is here to help with her family connections, and Lovegood is clearly our artistic genius?”

Harry nodded and quickly began to explain what they had so far. Though he did clear up that Katie was fairly advanced with runes as well and was helping him work out ideas, even if she couldn’t carve and activate them just yet. Unlike him, she wouldn’t be going through her Transference Ritual until a more normal age, even if she’d been taught quite a lot about runic languages already, growing up among all the magical crafters in her family...

... ..

-January 25th-

Katie felt a *little bit* guilty as wrenched her eyes away from Daphne’s arse again. When she’d agreed to bring the Slytherin girl onboard the project, assuming Harry could somehow convince her, she *hadn’t* accounted for the fact they’d been spending a fair bit of casual time together. Nor had she expected the *pureblood* to have been sucked firmly into the new ‘Magical Punk’ style that the fashionistas of the *Cold Issue* shop had created. Apparently, Daphne was a fan, given the tight leather pants and crop top with intricate scrollwork she was wearing. She’d even added green highlights to her black hair with magic, adding a little house pride to the outfit.

Unfortunately, those *tight leather pants* made Katie *very aware* that the other girl was attractive. She wasn’t actually sure yet if she was *into* other girls, but Angelina and Alicia having been in a ‘*bi-curious* phase’ this year had certainly opened her eyes to the possibility. Mostly because her pair of older friends were shameless exhibitionists and hadn’t bothered being circumspect about their explorations in the shared Quidditch showers. Seeing the two older girls ‘experimenting’ with each other a bit had certainly done *something* for Katie, at least. A fact which left her awkwardly trying not to eye other girls in curiosity, trying to figure out if she really *was* into girls or not.

The fact that, even a year younger and just recently turned fifteen, Daphne had an arse that Katie was fairly sure a completely *straight* girl would take a second look at? Particularly when displayed in tight leather pants? Well, it was certainly making all the time spent together more *interesting*, in both good and bad ways. Not helped by the fact she and Harry were slowly getting to see why Daphne clicked so well with the ridiculously energetic and vivacious Tracey Davis.

Apparently, the careful shell of a proper pureblood princess was just that, a *shell*. The girl under it, who shined through more and more frequently as they worked with her, had a lot more *personality*. She had a quick, subtle, cutting wit which, combined with an insanely good poker face, often left you only making connections to a joke she made several minutes *after* she made it. Worse, she seemed to have a perfect sense of exactly *when* you finally got it, and a devastating amused smirk that she would level at you when it finally clicked.

She was also dangerously sexy, and Katie kinda wanted to find out if she *was* into girls. Which was *sort of a problem* since she was, you know...dating Harry. She *liked* Harry, too, and was still getting along amazingly well with him! Which left her in a suppppperr awkward position she wasn't quite sure how to deal with, and feeling a little guilty about Harry seemingly being oblivious to it.

Doing her best to shake off the confusing mix of emotions, Katie refocused her efforts on coming up with more ideas for how to manipulate the terrain features of their playboard. In burying her nose in yet another book on advanced rune arrays, she missed Daphne shooting her a pleased smirk, most certainly not having missed the looks Katie was giving her...

... ..

-February 1st-

Daphne was quite pleased with how things were going. She had, since the previous year, been looking for a proper opportunity to worm her way into Harry Potter's inner circle. Not, of course, for any malicious reason. She and her family weren't *those* types of Slytherins. Depressingly few people remembered that Slytherin house was *supposed* to be the home of those who most firmly adhered to the idea of a meritocracy. Ambitious individuals, often dreamers, who believed *skill* and *cunning* were the way to achieve their goals of dreams.

Want to be the minister of Magic?

Sure, that was very much a Slytherin goal, one that was properly done by gaining political skills and cunningly outmaneuvering everyone else that wanted the position. With whoever was the *best* at executing their chosen platform, and convincing the public that it was the right platform, ending up in the spot. At least in theory. A theory that didn't exactly hold up with the current minister, but in Daphne's opinion that was mostly because the only politician arguably skilled enough to have outmaneuvered all other contenders was sadly a fool that had kissed the Dark Lord's feet. Something which had, combined with family history, doomed any chance of Lucious Malfoy actually succeeding. Fudge was a compromise candidate, since there were no sufficiently skilled individuals on any one side to take the position currently. Not the point, though...

Want to be the world's greatest *healer*?

That was *also* a Slytherin thing. One needed to be incredibly ambitious to have a goal like that, as well as both dedicated and talented, seeking to develop your *skill* so you could rise above all the other healers. Slytherin was supposed to be an expression of that sort of drive and dream. Further examples of such a desire to 'be the best,' in a way that wasn't about political backstabbing, could be found in the last two Heads of Slytherin House. Severus Snape and Horace

Slughorn were arguably *the* two greatest potion masters in the entirety of Europe. Well, so long as you excluded Flamel, at least. Three of the last four Head Healers for St. Mungos had been Slytherins, as had a good chunk of the Bell family, with their aspirations to be the best in various magical crafting fields.

So on and so on.

It was a genuine pity, an appalling one, that a single dumb fuck of a Dark Lord had utterly wrecked the reputation of the last *five generations* of Slytherin house. Stupid *literal* bastard had screwed up fifty plus years of the house's reputation with his, as Tracey was fond of saying, 'abject cuntery.' Even now, Daphne was forced to play politics she was only interested in out of necessity, trying to cleanse some of the taint from their house, because the children of the fools that had followed that fool were still mucking things up.

Thankfully at least *half* of her own year were salvageable.

Getting back to the point, though, rather than annoying herself into wanting to hex someone again, Daphne had realized by the end of their First Year that Harry Potter had been...dubiously sorted. Yes, he *did* possess the 'recklessly noble heroism' common to Gryffindors. Yet, he possessed ambition and incredible innovation talent that *should* have placed him in Slytherin. Idiots thought that Ravenclaws were the innovators when, in reality, they were mostly academics. Ravenclaws were far more likely to become archivists, historians, or other purely academic knowledge seekers of various sorts. Not innovators.

Luna Lovegood was, in point of fact, actually an excellent example of that truth. A budding and highly intelligent magizoologist, she was just likely to become *accidentally* famous, like Scamander had. Properly Raves were generally not interested in being the top of their field out of ambition, but just ended up there by being very good at their area of interest. Luna was likely to end up at the top of her field because her intelligence and passion took her there, rather than out of any desire to 'be the best.' In, again, a field that was more academic than anything. Magizoologists didn't generally do *practical* things, like invent new potions, with what they learned. They just learned things about creatures and then passed that knowledge onto others who did something useful with it.

No, Harry Potter was clearly an *innovator*. One that had an ambitious big picture he was working towards. Which was something that Daphne was drawn to on both a personal level and a practical one. On the practical side, he was a gateway to getting out from under the stigma currently associated with Slytherin House. Being close friends with Harry Potter would go a *long* way to disassociating her from the idiots of her house still ranting about blood purity.

Yes, old wizarding families were better than new ones. But it had fuck all to do with *blood* or any sort of inherent potential. The old families just had the connections, money, and family knowledge to outperform virtually anyone muggle born or raised. Daphne understood that, had zero interest in the blood purity nonsense that had screwed over multiple generations of Slytherins, and knew that a close relationship with 'The Boy Who Lived' was a good way to wash that reputation away from her personally. Heck, Blaise knew it too, which is why he was giving such fair deals to Potter, instead of trying to squeeze the business newbie for more profit.

That was the cold logic, though, and it made up only half the equation.

On a more personal level, Potter was intellectually challenging and stimulating, his projects driving her to better herself in her own areas of interest. Such as their current project, which was pushing her love of animation charms to new heights. Heck, even just the new ideas he'd injected into the school last year had started that. The *Magical Merch Merchant* souvenir shop he'd inspired Zabani, the Weasley twins and herself to create, had gotten her seriously working on animation charms that had previously been just a hobby. Bonus points that it earned her points with her father toward making her heir position as heir permanent, but that was honestly just an extra. She was genuinely enjoying working with the *Weasley twins* of all people, to come up with clever animation charms.

Then, of course, was the fact that Harry was honestly good looking. Which she'd admittedly *hoped* to use as an 'in' this year, as she hadn't failed to notice the way he looked at her occasionally. While not nearly as blatant as McMillian, Harry obviously appreciated her looks. As he should, of course. Daphne had inherited her mother's looks, and said mother had literally made a fortune off being a model when she was younger. Those looks and the way she'd used them to found her own successful beauty and cosmetics line had been what brought mother to the attention of her father in the first place. Now, cosmetics and other beauty products were a core addition to the Greengrass herbology and potions empire.

Unfortunately, or so she'd believed at first, she hadn't moved fast enough and Bell had stolen the march on her. She'd been surprised to discover how legitimately disappointing that had been, not having realized she'd become a bit invested in the idea. She'd held out hope, of course, given that first relationships typically didn't last, but she'd resigned herself to the idea that she'd need to find a new way to break into his 'inner circle' for the time being.

She'd still been working on other ideas for the *how* of that, when Harry himself had presented her the perfect opportunity.

To be honest, even if the project *hadn't* been an interesting one, she'd likely have accepted helping just for the exposure and chance to...befriend him somehow? Honestly, Tracey was her only real 'friend,' rather than 'ally,' and Daphne still had *no idea* how that had happened. It had, frankly, been mostly Tracey's doing, not hers, even if Daphne was still quietly pleased by it to this day. The fact that the project Harry, Bell, and Lovegood were working on was *actually interesting* was just icing on the cake, really.

Now, well, Daphne was pretty sure she'd found the cherry to go on top of the icing on that cake. She'd dressed to be attractive to *Harry*, just as a way to implant the idea of looking at her that way firmly in his brain for later. That it had, entirely accidentally, had an effect on *Bell* as well? Well, that was *fascinating*. Mind you, it was still very early, but Daphne *was* aware that she'd need to make certain sorts of arrangements when she was older, to preserve the Greengrass family name. Getting into a 'witches agreement' with someone of the right inclinations, to share a lover so multiple names could more easily be passed on? Well, it wasn't that uncommon at all. A neat solution that had often been used in Wizarding Britain.

Admittedly, Daphne wasn't sure if she was attracted to women yet or not, but the idea of testing the waters wasn't off the table, she felt. Though, maneuvering things into place so that Katie and Harry were open to the idea might take some work. Assuming she decided to go for it, of course. For now, she'd just continue to dress to impress and let the idea of her as attractive settle in for both of them. Far better to secure her position as a friend before trying anything complicated and potentially prone to backfiring, after all...

... ..

-February 10th-

Harry hummed to himself as he worked on the mockup of a train engine. No, they didn't have the final specs from the Hogwarts Express Revival committee yet. However, *someone* had possessed the common sense to make use of the information he'd forwarded to them from his mundane contacts. The ones that he'd had go looking for used locomotives for sale. Sadly, as he and Professor Sinistra had yet to fully crack shielding magic and electricity from interfering with each other, he'd had to stick with Steam Locomotives. Despite that, he'd been determined to find one at least a *bit* newer than the original Express, which had been built in 1937. Surprisingly enough, his agents had found him *five*, in various states of disrepair. Harry had, of course, forwarded the information to the committee.

Again, in a shocking display of common sense, *someone* on that committee had gotten the lead out on acquiring one of them, so that the various teams could at least assess what they'd be working with. What technical documentation was available had been provided, and to Harry's personal pleasure, his suggestion of providing a memory of someone doing a walkthrough of the locomotive had also been taken. Which was a major advantage for him, since he had a Memory Projector on hand!

The locomotive that the committee had acquired was, as it happened, a BR Standard Class 7. Otherwise also known as the *Britannia* class, which he suspected might well have swayed the committee. It was a very patriotic sort of name, after all. The specific engine they'd purchased had been built in 1954, one of the last of her series, though even the design itself was from 1951. A decade and a half newer might not be *much*, but it was *something*.

Better yet, part of the reason they'd gotten such a good deal on the locomotive was that its outer shell was quite a mess. Meaning it would be entirely reasonable to redesign it to look a bit more modern yet, though he knew he wouldn't be able to go *too far* without risking rejection of the design. Still, modernizing the look at least a *bit*, something he could even sell as helping 'blend in' with modern trains to attract less 'muggle attention,' would be yet another small chip in the ossified mindset of the wizarding public. The fact that he had every intention of adding massive modernization of the *interior* for the entire Express was the bigger point, of course.

Also a point that might possibly be harder to sell, unfortunately, given that there *technically* wasn't anything wrong with the Express's rail cars, having been detached from the Express for storage when it was turned into a golem. Still, he was going to argue hard that the entire Express was overdue for a modernization, adding features that the original hadn't possessed. Such as a dining car that would be able to feed the students more than just *candy* for lunch. Seriously, that

was one hell of a design flaw and he had no idea why it had never been corrected. He fully intended to donate to making *that* change himself, if he had to.

Still, for now, he needed to concentrate on plans for the locomotive.

Not, it had to be said, on the actual moving parts so much. As much as he liked to think of himself as an up-and-coming talent with his various bits of work, he wasn't *half* delusional enough to pretend that he could better what Katie's family could manage when it came to making the locomotive actually...locomote? Was that a word? Eh, probably. Whether it was a word or not didn't change the truth. The workers of Cog & Bell would do a *far* better, *far* cleaner job of converting the steam engine to be magically powered that he could manage.

That part was a huge undertaking and complex undertaking, since it included far more than just 'produce water and heat via magic.' The original Express had required very little maintenance, as every centimeter of it had been heavily enchanted. Spells to grease the proverbial *and* literal wheels, magical reinforcement to prevent metal stress, control systems, linkages and, of course, the steam engine itself. Not to mention the muggle repelling charms, protective arrays, and a dozen other things. The replacement would need hundreds of carefully layered spells, all anchored by runes, and was *well* beyond the sort of complexity that Harry could manage right now.

Which is why Harry himself was working on just a few bits. Things he felt he could genuinely do better than anyone else. Such as a *vastly* modernized control scheme that took advantage of the 'holographic' display and interface system he was now decently familiar with. Something that, when combined with a lot of things he'd learned about sensor spells while working with Professor Sinistra, would provide a lot of data for the train engineer. Temperatures, weather alerts, feedback about the train cars and track! Not to mention far superior controls to the near-purely-mechanical systems of the old design.

If much of what he was working on *just so happened* to be a bit overkill, more suitable to what a magical aircraft might need? Well, there was no reason at all for anyone to be suspicious of that, he was sure, and it was excellent practice for future projects of his own, which he hoped to one day take a crack at...

Chapter 35: Hurricane

-February 12th-

Harry frowned, stopping his conversation with Daphne, even as the Hufflepuffs cheered another successful goal, putting them twenty points up over Ravenclaw. Rolling his wrist in a specific motion that caused his wand to spring free and drop into his hand, he felt out the *odd* sensation he was getting from it. Daphne, who had become close enough since First Year to be let in on the half-secret of his wand's core, immediately stopped talking about the animation charm they'd been going over.

"A warning?"

Harry grimaced, looking around, then glanced down at his wand again.

“I’m...not sure. It’s not like before, it’s more like the wand is *excited*? I’ve never felt anything like it before.”

Daphne was already at attention, scanning the crowd with her own wand out but held pointed low, and even Katie had noticed, despite having been more into the match. There had been talks about canceling quidditch, despite the lack of follow up attacks after Winter Break, and everyone was a bit more alert than normal. In truth, the very lack of additional attacks, combined with source of the attacks not being found, was precisely *why* there had been such discussion. No one really believed the culprit behind everything had backed off, and the amount of time that had passed was worryingly long. More than enough to prepare something even more spectacular than the Express Golem, as people had finally settled on calling it.

In the end, despite some trepidation, the Heads of House had decided that there wasn’t enough justification to cancel the upcoming Hufflepuff vs. Ravenclaw game. That said, the entire staff was paranoid enough by this point that certain precautions had been taken. Even the students seemed reassured that the Hogwarts Knights were serving concessions throughout the crowd, for one thing. For another, more quietly, Dumbledore had worked with Lady Hogwarts to add a secondary set of wards around the pitch. There was a limit to how complex they could make those, without interfering with the much more potent main wards, but they would offer a certain level of brute protection.

They had even added a ward specifically for bees, just in case.

“Harry, if it’s warning you, we need to alert someone, right?”

That comment came from Katie and Harry bit his lip, before nodding and looking for a professor. They were actually in the ‘Hufflepuff’ section of the stands, though that wasn’t a formal thing so much as just tradition. It was somewhat neutral territory, since all three of them were on good terms with the house, and a Gryff sitting with the Snakes or vice versa would have been...a poor idea. That meant that Sprout was the closest professor, and he hesitated before shrugging and standing to make his way toward her, Katie and Daphne following along, all three of them scowling as they were forced to abandon the Rain Shield Charm they’d been sheltering under.

It was a little annoying that the match had been happening in the rain, but at least it was warm enough today that hadn’t been sleet or snow. It was something of a pity that the density of magic around Hogwarts made any attempt at weather prediction useless, or they might have tried scheduling matches on more pleasant days. Still, the rain wasn’t *too* bad yet, and there was always as much chance it would get better rather than worse, so no one had thought twice about it. Even with the light drizzle, the stands were fairly full, rain was easily enough kept off with simple spells most students knew. More to the point, despite there being more entertainment options in Hogwarts these days, quidditch matches were still a major draw. The sport was popular, house pride was a thing, and it was still a traditional social event. Meaning the vast majority of the school was here.

They only made it halfway to the professor before the sky opened up.

The rain had started to pick up slowly but surely as the game progressed. But now, with a massive crack of thunder and lightning, a *deluge* began to pour down on the pitch and stands. That,

alone, might not have been anything to remark upon. Storms happened, particularly in the Scottish Highlands, right on top of a conjunction of three major ley lines. Unfortunately, that *wasn't* all that happened, and Harry's wand *finally* tingled with *warning* in addition to *excitement* as some of the deluge began to coalesce into monstrous forms that lunged to attack.

"Shite! TO ARMS!"

Even as he shouted that, Harry sent an Ice Arrow into one watery creature before it could lunge into a group of younger students, with Daphne being nearly as fast as he was to shoot of a blasting spell into another. His own attack was more effective, since it froze the water...while the one Daphne shot just started to pull itself back together again a moment after being destroyed. Katie was slower on the draw, but that actually let her shift her own spell based on what she'd seen, twisting it to be a Glacius spell instead of a Blasting Curse. It didn't work as well as Harry's Ice Arrow had, but it *did* dramatically slow the attacking creature, with a follow up from another student who'd drawn and hired a Reducto quickly shattering it. It started to piece itself back together, but did so far more slowly than the one Daphne had hit.

"ICE SPELLS WORK! USE THEM IF YOU KNOW THEM!"

Flicking his wand to send out more Ice Arrows with his shout, Harry was gratified to see others already reacting too. Thankfully, given that *this time* the attacks were *everywhere*, most of the students had been drilled with at least a solid option or two in the way of defensive spells. Several people were injured, some seriously, but groups quickly managed to form up around professors, Hogwarts Knights, and the students of Flitwick's group. Unfortunately, the chaos and the need to direct students against it meant that it was Ron Weasley of all people who first noticed the larger problem.

"Bloody hell! Look at the sky!"

His cry got the attention of several people, including Harry, even as he blasted one of the largest water-creatures yet with an Ice Spear. He glanced up...and nearly miss-timed his next attack to blast away a smaller monster that had been trying to sneak through a gap. The clouds above them were an angry looking purple shot through with black and *swirling* in a way he'd only ever seen on the telly before. Paling, he wandlessly cast a Snorous charm and shouted above the noise of the fighting.

"HURRICANE! WE NEED TO GET TO SHELTER!"

He cancelled the sound amplifying charm and redoubled his efforts against the constantly-renewing water golems. This time, instead of trying to link up with other groups as he had been, he focused on cutting a way *out* of the stadium. By this point, they'd collected a solid two dozen Hufflepuffs around them, though half of them were younger years that were being encircled and shielded by their seniors. Still, despite the size of the group, it was only Harry and the potent elemental spells he brought to the table that let them make progress, and it didn't last.

They only made as far as the nearest exit when lightning struck right in front of them, blinding them for several seconds. Only an instinctive cast of a druid-spell by Harry, one that brought up a wall of Earth, saved them, as an elemental made out of *lightning and clouds* smashed

into that Earthen Wall. Pandora, unaffected by the flash-blindness, guided him to spear it with spikes made from the wall, and it collapsed as the earthen spikes grounded its lightning. Yet, the moment they tried to move forward again...another one formed. Worse, a second one formed before another group half again the size of their own, being led by professor Sprout, as soon as they made it as close to the exit as Harry had.

“Fuck! The storm elementals are trapping us here!”

It was only as he cast about for a solution that Pandora drew his attention to something. For some reason, his wand was *still* practically wagging its non-existent tail like a puppy in *excitement*, barely warning of danger at all. He’d remained vaguely aware of that fact, but hadn’t had the spare brain power to try figuring out what the hell was up with that. Pandora, on the other hand, *had*. Now, she highlighted a *string of magic* leading from the *Thunderbird Feather* core of his wand. Not into the sky, as one might have assumed, but into the *ground*, at an angle that put whatever was drawing a sense of *like-to-like* directly under the center of the pitch.

Pandora, taking control of the enchantments on his glasses, activated and overcharged the X-ray function, the result causing Harry to gape. Shifting to action, Harry reinforced his wand with magic, a trick common to druids rather than any sort of modern practice, and jammed it point first into the ground. Chanting under his breath, he *pushed*, forming a large, sharply curved *dome* of Earth easily big enough to shelter fifty or more students.

“Hufflepuffs! Hold this position, get as many younger years inside the dome as you can and hold it! This is a *ritual* and I’ve found the center and caster! Send any professors that reach here and aren’t needed to defend the students after me! Daphne, Katie, on me!”

He’d pushed his way out of the dome even as he shouted instructions over the storm. A vicious wave of Icy Spears temporarily cleared a gap in the water elementals and he jammed his wand into the ground again, this time carving a sloped *tunnel* into the Earth. It was only as he barely felt his reserves dip after a second major working that he *finally* processed why his wand was so *excited*. The *magical storm* was *supercharging* the potency of the Thunderbird Tailfeather core, cutting the cost of his spells by a significant margin. That dome and tunnel should have strained his magical channels to the point of him collapsing again, as he had after the Elemental Cascade spell last year. Instead, they didn’t even ache with strain yet.

Silently thankful for the unknowing mistake the enemy had made, Harry charged into the tunnel, Daphne and Katie at his heels. The pitch was a large space, a bit over 150 meters long and 50 wide. Thankfully, the ‘puff stands were along one of the sides, meaning even from the exit, he’d only needed to carve a tunnel 20 meters to reach the underground chamber his wand and Pandora had pointed him toward. He’d had the sense not to finish the tunnel until they pounded down it, having left a fraction of a meter of dirt as a final wall.

“The caster is on the other side, blasting curses at the wall on three! Don’t care about *who she is*, just *knock her the fuck out* and we can get answers later!”

Not giving Katie or Daphne a chance to question, he started the countdown and was grateful that they both raised wands without question to follow his command. On three, all of them sent out their best blasting curses, shattering the remaining bits of wall and launching them

violently *inward*, toward the ritual circle. Harry darted through, already casting a stunner as he went, only to barely dodge a vicious-looking bolt of black lightning. Thankfully, the caster had targeted him, and Daphne and Katie scattered to the sides, though their own stunners were reflected with contemptuous ease.

Rolanda Hooch sneered as both she and a slowly-disintegrating journal glowed with the power of the ritual.

“You’re too late, Potter! As soon as the people above start dying, they will fuel my rebirth fully. Not just as this pathetic hag, but in my true body, ready to pick up where my older failure left off.”

The voice that came from their *flying instructor* was layered, her actual voice being covered over by a younger, male voice. Her/His wand flashed and it was Harry’s turn to parry. An instinctive gamble had him empowering his wand and using a duelist’s trick Flitwick had taught them to draw a spell toward its tip. It *shouldn’t* have worked, not with a spell as potent as what the unknown entity had launched, but the Thunderbird tailfeather of his wand was so empowered by the magical storm that anything *lightning* based was never going to work against it, the spell easily being grabbed and redirected into the wall of the chamber.

“What?! How did you do that!”

The furious voice, more male than female now, almost didn’t respond in time as Daphne and Katie, having kept circling, both used its distraction to launch more spells. Even slowed by its distracted fury, the composite entity still managed to raise a shield potent enough to take the spells they used, even the rather *Dark* bone shattering spell Daphne hadn’t hesitated to launch.

Unfortunately for it, Harry was running on instincts developed while working with the Druid and Shaman spells his grandmother had studied.

Without thinking the action through, in that moment where the entity was on total defense, he threw himself *into* the ritual circle it was at the center of. Normally an *idiotic* thing to do with an active ritual, when he instinctively flexed his wandless magical *connection* to the elements, gained as part of that study of elemental and nature magics...he connected to the ritual. Hooch’s eyes widened as, abruptly, the power of the ritual was *split* and the mind puppeting her body was forced to wrestle with Harry’s will as he tried to seize control of the magic empowering it.

It should have been an easy victory for the originator of the ritual.

Only, as the sweat suddenly pouring off the witch’s body showed, that wasn’t the case *at all*. Part of that was because *Harry* had the greater connection to elemental magic here, which was a fundamental part of the ritual. Another piece was because the mind of Rolanda Hooch herself was fighting against her possession. By *far* the most critical element, however, clicked into place as a flash of magical power caused his enemy’s attempt to assault him through the ritual to *slide off*. Internally, both Harry and Pandora nearly lost focus as they realized *what* the attack had slid off of, his mother’s protection *surging* with vicious power at the feel of the one magical signature it had been specifically keyed to protect Harry from.

Abruptly, both Pandora and Harry knew *exactly* who was possessing the witch across from them.

“Voldemort, you should have had the good grace to ***stay dead!***”

Fury, not fear, raced through Harry and Pandora both as they were faced with the architect of Lily Potter’s death, and found he was *vulnerable*. A protection that should have been nothing but a *defense* was connected directly to the spirit of the madman through a ritual that empowered them both. Determination and *vindictive wrath* powered the brutal spike of energy sourced from that protection and shoved it through the ritual that connected them.

The spirit of a sixteen-year-old Tom Marvolo Riddle didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of surviving the result, being seared away from both Rolanda Hooch’s body and the remnants of the Diary that had already been disintegrating as the spirit migrated. The witch, alive but damaged by the backlash, was unconscious immediately. Which, unfortunately for Harry, abruptly shoved a ritual he *didn’t understand*, fully onto his shoulders.

Eyes widening as *too much magic* poured into him, only Pandora’s quick action, detached from the pain, saved him from being instantly incinerated by the power. It was all he could do to stay conscious, somehow knowing he and *everyone else* would be dead if he passed out, as his companion frantically worked to redirect and channel the energy. Katie, bless her, hadn’t been idle, having found the key rune of the ritual. Normally a *bad plan*, she blasted it to bits anyway as she heard Harry cry in agony...and *this time* luck or fate made that the right move, as it cut the power flowing into the ritual off.

Now only faced with the power already within the ritual, Pandora did everything she could to expend that energy quickly. Lightning arced off of Harry’s body, even as she reinforced Harry’s magical core with some of the magic, filled it with more, and even dumped a fair bit of it into her own matrix. It wasn’t enough, and she frantically reached out to Katie and Daphne, mentally apologizing to them as she connected Harry to them through the elemental magic thick in the air. She offloaded healthy chunks of remaining power to both of them, causing them to cry out. In shock and discomfort more than pain.

That was finally enough, barely, to keep Harry’s magical channels from burning out. Even as he lost the battle against the creeping darkness to stay awake, they spotted Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall charging into the room. Too late to help against the crisis, but perhaps in time to get all four fallen bodies to a healer before any permeant damage set in...

<<End of Current Content>>