**Chapter 55**

**Deadly Games**

**1 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It was Friday evening and the Gryffindor common room was in effervescence. Okay, maybe it was anything but a surprise: every week the students harbouring proudly the Lion banner welcomed with relief the end of the week’s classes.

But this week-end was going to be special and today, even ‘Saint Prefect-Head Boy’ Percy Weasley had abandoned the idea to work here – Leo had seen retreat in the direction of the Head Boy-Head Girl quarters, maybe to mourn with his girlfriend how rambunctious and loud his House could be.

Neville could admit they were probably going to pay a nasty price next week in Potions. Snape had of course refused to acknowledge there was more in his spiteful little world than Potions and given them a mountain of homework, and for the moment neither he nor one of his third-year housemates had managed to write the first paragraph of this long and tedious dissertation.

But honestly, who cared about Potions when there were Quidditch team recruiters and the manager of the English national team arriving tomorrow? The first phase of the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup had been advanced to this Saturday and Sunday, and it was far more important than some grey-haired git polishing his dirty cauldrons!

Anyway, Oliver Wood had brought a mini-Quidditch stadium in the middle of the common room and was explaining complex strategies to everyone in hearsay.

“This will be a day where we will have no room for mistakes,” their enthusiast Captain announced for the eighth time in a solemn tone. “We must crush Ravenclaw, take a decisive advantage for the Cup and show we are the best team Hogwarts can field to our prestigious visitors!”

Some first and second-years drank the words of the seventh-year boy, but most around the room were playing various games or generally looking for an excuse to make noise.

Then at long last, the entrance of the common room opened and Angelina Johnson shook her head before the noisy spectacle.

“The team compositions have been officially announced, Oliver,” The sentence was the equivalent of a Silencing Charm on the Gryffindors, though the atmosphere grew hungrier and anticipating.

“Are there major surprises?”

“Oh, lot of them,” replied the fifth-year Lioness. “First, Flint has made more changes than we predicted. From the previous team, Bletchley and Pucey are the sole survivors. Chasers are Flint himself, Adrian Pucey and second-year Damon Harper. Montague, Warrington, Bole and Derrick have all been replaced.”

“Look like the troll has finally understood big and dumb is not the way to victory, twin of mine,” commented one of the red-haired Lion beaters.

“This is not funny!” Wood had a tormented look in his eyes. “What are the other changes in their team, Angelina?”

“It seems they took a page of our own book and hired the Carrow Twins to play Beaters. Their new Seeker is also a girl, her name is Tracey Davis.”

On the seat right next to him, Ron whistled and he was far from the only one. As far as everyone could remember, there hadn’t been a girl in the Slytherin Quidditch Team this last decade. And now Flint had chosen three of them for the match against Hufflepuff?

“Hufflepuff has not changed much from their last training sessions, however. Their Chasers are Malcolm Preece, Heidi Macavoy, and Tamsin Applebee. The two Beaters are as usual Anthony Rickett and Maxine O’Flaherty. Their Keeper is Herbert Fleet, and of course their Captain Cedric Diggory plays as Seeker.”

“And Ravenclaw?”

“Davies, Bradley and Potter as Chasers, Denald and Waltford as Keepers, Grant Page will be the Keeper and Chang the Seeker.”

“That can’t be right!” The proclamation had come from Lee Jordan but there were plenty of shouts agreeing with him in the seconds which followed. “Davies is sometimes arrogant, but he can’t believe his team can hold against Gryffindor with his four reserve players!”

Neville found himself nodding with the entire audience. Yeah, the Ravenclaw team of last year was good, but their ultimate victory was based on the disintegration of the Slytherin team, not a clear superiority over theirs. Gryffindor has won the match against Ravenclaw, and he had caught the Snitch easily against Chang.

“They must know something we ignore...” muttered Oliver Wood, casting several Charms on his mini-pitch to represent new formations.

“I don’t think it is true for Potter and Chang, but the boys Angelina has just named are big and not that smart,” Parvati intervened. “They’re very much the kind of boys Flint would want in his team.”

Whispers echoed everywhere as the Lions commented this information before Fred opened his mouth.

“The only reason why the Ravenclaws would change their team...”

“-is because they know they will be flying in difficult weather conditions on Sunday.”

Most eyes turned towards the windows, where the sky was a light grey.

“But in this case, why would they keep Chang and Potter in the line-up?” demanded Cormac McLaggen.

“These two must be their best flyers when the visibility conditions are not good...”

Neville remembered the infernal sessions under the rain Wood had forced them to endure last year...and winced. The Boy-Who-Lived loved playing Quidditch, but when you couldn’t see ten feet before you and you were thrown from one corner of the stadium to another by a thunderstorm and drenched to the bone, there was little love left for Quidditch and more a deep urge to catch the Snitch before running back to the castle.

The conversation afterwards consisted vaguely of Oliver Wood mumbling about complicated and dangerous strategies and the three Chasers trying to cheer him up and convince him that no, it was neither practical nor useful to attack in reverse looping the Ravenclaw goal posts.

“Hey,” the voice of Leo Black forced him to stop looking at the imitation the twins made of their oldest Prefect-brother. “My father sent me some new pranking materials and recipes of the new Zonko’s collection. Should I try them tomorrow and demoralise the Ravenclaws?”

“No,” Neville Longbottom replied after a few seconds where his heart screamed to say ‘yes’. “It’s tempting I know, but the bookworms would seize the pretext to report the match and complain to the recruiters. And some of the team managers have friends in high places, they would try to give problems to Dumbledore, my grandmother, your father and the school. We will wait a few days and test them on some unsuspecting Slytherins –they deserve it, the snakes.”

“I will store the boxes in one of the abandoned rooms close to the dungeons,” promised Ron. “Snape never bothers searching for contraband close to his ream of grease and darkness.”

“Good initiative,” the Boy-Who-Lived felicitated him, “now we use all this agitation to go to the sixth-floor and finish our little ‘healing potion’...”

This week-end was going to be great. The inexperienced vipers were going to be crushed by the duffers of Hufflepuff. The Lions were going to show the British professionals House Gryffindor was reigning in the skies and flying largely above the amateurs of the three other Houses. Their pranks for the next weeks were going to be ten times more spectacular and their prank stocks were legion. And best of all, the new Marauders were going to become Animagi.

It was not a little bit of bad weather which was going to bother them...

**2 October 1993, Geneva, Switzerland**

When Lucius Malfoy had taken the lead of the ICW British delegation, Violet had honestly expected she would be back in Britain before a month was over. Everyone knew the odious blonde-haired Lord was a former Death Eater, and while the Order of the Phoenix didn’t advertise the identity of its members, Violet had never hidden her sympathies for Supreme Mugwump Albus Dumbledore. As the man had bought his freedom and cancelled numerous infractions plenty of times with the greatest ease, the forty-three years old witch had imagined her dismissal would not pose a lot of problems to this snake pretending to be a respectable aristocrat.

She had been wrong. Maybe it was because Malfoy was leading the Dark Traditionalists and this bunch of former Death Eaters was isolationist in nature. Maybe it was for another reason. In the end, Malfoy had placed his supporters at the most important and influential posts while letting the wizards and witches supporting Albus Dumbledore assume the missions they felt beneath their dignity.

Violet Pettus had inherited – her predecessor had refused to obey the orders of a notorious ‘reformed’ Death Eater – the position of British representative at the ICW Criminal Court.

It was, on parchment, a prestigious position.

It was in reality a bureaucratic nightmare.

Oh, yes the theory went that the ICW Criminal Court had the power to rend judgements invalidating those in the home country of birth and replace it with its verdict. It could emit arrest mandates for Dark Lords and infamous criminals. It could track and condemn outlaws from the frozen wastes of the North Pole to the jungles of South America.

In practise, things were a bit different. Criminals were not exactly rushing to Geneva to get a second trial; most crimes in their home countries were more often than not acts recognised as crimes by the ICW penal courts. No, the only criminals the ICW judged were those who had committed so many crimes in different countries that there was simply no way a single judge of one Ministry could do the job. Seven judges were appointed for this duty, with seven assistants and numerous representatives of the different ICW members to assist them.

The number of trials was small, and except in tumultuous times like the Fall of Grindelwald in 1945, the ICW Criminal Court rarely judged more than one or two criminals per year, which gave the judges a week or two of real work. The rest of the year, the work consisted in receiving the report of trials from across the ICW Ministries who wanted to demonstrate the correct justice procedures had been followed or studying the cases of criminals at large who posed a real threat to the Statute of Secrecy and their society at large.

It wasn’t rewarding. No, it wasn’t rewarding at all. The Criminal Court was plagued every day by bureaucratic nonsense and the law-and-enforcement forces tracking Dark Wizards like Grindelwald informed them of their relevant actions months after the fact. And as if her sense of powerlessness hadn’t reached new summits, the ICW squadron commanders had told her quite clearly they considered the prisoners who had escaped Azkaban their last priority.

Until that point, she hadn’t realised how many wizards and witches were disgusted by the prison of Azkaban and its Dementors. Now, unfortunately, she had a good idea and it worried her. The Vampire-elder Victor of the Shadow Blades was in Transylvania and invited to official receptions, but neither the vampire-bought Ministry nor their neighbours were making a move to protest this illegal and treasonous behaviour.

“Have you found the forms for case G43682-JH639?” she asked to the German she was working with. “The Australian judge lost them two days ago somewhere in these piles...”

Her hand made a vague sign towards all the big assemblages of parchment crowding every room and waiting to be read.

“Bah, we will find them back in a couple of months,” shrugged in a heavily accented French the bearded man, with a detached air which convinced her he cared about the form as much as his first pair of socks. “Now have you found the papers for Under-Officer Karl?”

The great obsidian-coloured doors of the International Confederation of Wizards’ Criminal Court chose this moment to open, allowing her to not answer negatively this question. The chatter died in the chamber, as this event signified the court had a new case to judge.

The regular noise of boots against the ground arrived to their ears and a woman arrived at the end of the long and high marble stairs. She wore a long black robe of conservative style, long black gloves and her blacks hairs had been combed in a large braid...

Violet opened her mouth in disbelief as she saw the visage of the woman. There was no madness in these black eyes, no mad cackle coming out of her mouth...but she knew this was her.

Her mind screamed in disbelief the contrary, that the Death Eater female would surely not be so brazen or so stupid to walk into the headquarters of the ICW and expect to walk away free.

But as the woman bowed largely twenty feet away from the seats of the ICW judges, Violet was forced to admit this was not a hallucination. Immediately, she cast her Patronus with a message for Headmaster Dumbledore. The Order of the Phoenix had to know. Then she wrote two hurried letters, one for Director Crouch, the other for Lucius Malfoy and sent them flying towards the British offices...they had to come here too.

Bellatrix Black was here.

“Honoured members of the International Criminal Court, I am Bellatrix Black-Lestrange, widow of Lord Lestrange and born in the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. I come before you today to seek justice. The government of Magical Britain, in a grievous miscarriage of their own laws, has violated the rights my blood entitled me and sent me to die in the cursed cells of Azkaban Prison. I escaped after more than a decade of torture and privations, and now I ask humbly this court for a trial which will reveal the mockery the Bagnold-appointed judges of London made of my first trial.”

“This court hears your words, Bellatrix Black-Lestrange,” and Violet felt alarm as it was the French witch, Hélène de Broglie, who had answered after mere seconds. “Your willingness to come today willingly is speaking well of your intentions and your intent to seek justice. Does the court wish to judge this witch?”

If the majority of the seven wands cast a red light, Bellatrix would be arrested and sent to London. If the majority of the seven wands cast green lights, the Death Eater would be re-judged for a second time.

Despite her hopes, the result was never in doubt. Seven green lights rose in the air, and the psychopathic bitch sworn to You-Know-Who was authorised to sit on a conjured chair.

Violet wished one of her superiors, especially Headmaster Dumbledore, was here, but alas the conjuring of the relevant files and the proper documentation took only fourteen minutes, as assistants ran from one corner of the justice chambers to the other and put everything ready for the trial. Not that Lucius Malfoy would be of a big help, she suspected, since it was his sister-in-law who was judged.

“Bellatrix Black-Lestrange, you were accused by the British Department of Law and Magical Enforcement of one hundred and seventeen manslaughter charges, eighty-two torture charges, membership in an ICW-recognised terrorist organisation, active participation in raids and illegal actions in service of said terrorist organisation, five hundred and forty-two charges of practising the Dark Arts, twenty-three charges of illegal duelling, sixty-one charges of treason, five charges of forbidden rituals’ involvement, three charges of sabbat practise...”

The litany of crimes and atrocities continued for three minutes until the great question was asked.

“How do you plead?”

“Not guilty, your honour,” immediately answered with a large smile the Dark Witch. “And to show my good will, I am willing to show my memories of my first trial.”

The judge from Luxembourg nodded and made a sign to several Aurors-type personnel detached for ICW duties.

Several wands were pointed to her head, ensuring no tiny use of Occlumency or Legilimency could be activated without being immediately detected. In a fluid move which looked like it had been rehearsed hundreds of times, a Serbian wizard pointed his wand at the Death Eater’s head and extracted the memories under the form of a silver orb.

“The memory has not been altered or corrupted, Judge.”

Seconds later, the shining substance was immerged into a projection-Pensieve and under the eyes of every ICW spectator, the familiar environment of a British courtroom materialised in bright colours.

Violet had not attended this particular Death Eater’s trial in 1981, but what she saw didn’t trouble her. The seats where the public was authorised to watch were crowded with a couple of hundred witches and wizards. Director Crouch was chairing the tribunal, many renowned figures of the DMLE and the Ministry Heads by his side.

As for the Dark Witch, she was in a cage, gagged, bound and in chains, with four Dementors surrounding her. A few seconds later, the creatures were ordered to leave the room.

Violet shivered as she heard the murmurs of anger in the ICW court. By Merlin’s beard, the woman was dangerous in the extreme! Of course Director Crouch had to take every available precaution with this murderess.

But the public didn’t seem to agree with this. And the judges were showing grim faces.

“Bellatrix Lestrange,” thundered the voice of the former DMLE Director like he was really in this courtroom. “You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law so that we may pass judgement on you for your uncountable crimes. You stand accused of one hundred and seventeen manslaughter charges...”

By this point every charge, every crime and every awful deed the lieutenant of You-Know-Who had ever done was repeated. Frankly, she was a bit surprised the woman had not tried to manipulate something, but it looked like the memory was genuine.

“We have heard the evidence against this witch, bought in the bloods of dozens of upstanding Aurors and Hit-Wizards,” continued Crouch. “No doubt that if she had managed to escape capture, this Death Eater would have planned to restore He Who Must Not be Named to power, and resume the massacres you committed while he was powerful.”

The British crowd shouted insults and cursed her name, forcing Bartemius Crouch in the memory to bellow.

“I now ask the jury to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban.”

All the wands were raised in the same moment, and the British crowd applauded in triumph...but the ICW observers did not. There was not a single smile, and most showed livid faces.

“Stop the memory and get out of my sight this travesty of justice,” it would have been better if the Luxembourgian judge was shouting. Violet didn’t know why she thought this, but she just knew it. Like she knew that she wasn’t going to enjoy what came next. “It seems a lawyer representing the accused and something looking like a vague process of justice is too much to expect from Britain.”

It was at that moment the murderess chose to speak once again.

“Naturally, their evidence is circumstantial and fabricated by my enemies,” said the Dark Witch. “To prove this point, your Honour, I think the accusation of being a member of the Death Eaters is particularly important.”

“Lord Sirius Black, Senior Auror Alastor Moody and DMLE Director Bartemius Crouch Senior themselves testified they had seen the Dark Mark on your arm when you were in the British Department of Law’s cells,” the Spanish Judge read aloud the parchment in front of him.

“It’s amusing, because I don’t remember these persons ever visiting me in my cell,” the smile on Bellatrix Lestrange’s face was sickening. “And I will note the Lord of House Black has not the legal standing to give orders or replace Aurors’ inspections in our law system. But fortunately, I know the ICW has a proven method to detect the Dark Mark of the terrorists known as Death Eaters. I wish to subject myself to this procedure and prove the witnesses in this case have lied.”

A few ICW Judges and assistant seemed concerned, but the Spanish wizard nodded and several enforcers closed once again on Bellatrix Black, who had just removed her long black gloves and rolled up the sleeves of her expensive robe. It of course meant the murderess had the means to access her fortune no matter her status of a wanted criminal...

A black-green Potion coated the arms of the Death Eater – who gasped for a second or two in pain – and numerous enchantments were cast by the witches and wizards...and after several minutes, Violet understood with fear they weren’t able to detect a Dark Mark anywhere on her body. By pure professionalism, they commanded the accused to denude her back and part of her belly, but here too the results were negative.

How in the name of Morgana had she done it? The woman was a Death Eater and a psychopathic bitch! And the Dark Marks You-Know-Who had branded on the arms were impossible to remove. Everyone knew it!

But, as she realised with anger and despair, the audience and the judges didn’t know it. The crimes of Bellatrix Lestrange had all been perpetrated in Britain, and for good or worse, the foreign involvements in the war against You-Know-Who had been limited to the recruitment of mercenaries and volunteers for both sides. They didn’t know how dangerous the killer in front of them was...and they didn’t care.

“Very well,” said slowly the Luxembourgian judge. “This case is looking more and more like a horrid farce rather than upholding justice as every ICW member-state has sworn to enforce...I am in mind to dismiss all these charges and ridiculous accusations. I notice this ‘Lord Sirius Black’ has been the main witness for over one hundred of the criminal charges, and since he declared under oath he had seen the Dark Mark on the accused arm while it is obviously untrue, it stands to reason he can’t be trusted in this courtroom. Please raise your wands...”

“I would say this judgement is premature,” and Violet stood straighter and more joyful. Albus Dumbledore had arrived, and he was calmly marching towards the judges in his brilliant magenta robes. However Bellatrix Black had been able to manipulate the court, she was not going to get away with her crimes.

“It is not in your power to declare what is right or wrong to this court, Albus Dumbledore,” the French witch declared in a glacial tone. “Especially as so far, each of the statements given by your government to imprison the accused has been proved false.”

“Bellatrix Black is a dangerous criminal and her evasion of Azkaban caused countless casualties,” Dumbledore’s expression did not waver, and Violet had the envy to lambast Hélène de Broglie for her audacity. “Are you willing to let this witch escape the sentence her crimes deserve?”

“Albus Dumbledore,” countered the French witch, “escaping Azkaban is not a crime, and even if it was, I think no one in this room save your British co-citizens present would blame the criminals from trying to escape. What your Ministry and their friends in London do with their prisoners may be authorised as long as the crimes fall under their jurisdiction, but don’t expect us to cheer when you are feeding wizards and witches to monsters which should have been exterminated ago if you had something decent in your body.”

The audience stood and applauded the tirade of Hélène de Broglie. Boos and accusations were directed at the Headmaster, and for the first time Violet Pettus understood there might be a real chance the murderess was going to get successful.

“But since you were the Supreme Mugwump of this noble institution for so many years...let’s see one more time if the accusations you formulated against the accused have any basis in reality.”

A roll of parchment was drawn seemingly at random from the large pile and read by the Spanish Judge.

“During the trial held in November 1981, ten wizards including yourself, declared the accused was responsible for the murder of Enchantress Lilian Marie Potter nee Evans of the Most Ancient House of Potter.” Hélène de Broglie turned her head towards the enforcers leaning against the walls. “Give the accused Veritaserum and let’s see if your evidence was solid *this time*.”

Violet wasn’t reassured in the least that the Death Eater smirked and swallowed the three drop of the colourless Potion without a sign of struggle.

“Your name?”

“Bellatrix Black-Lestrange nee Black, widow of Lord Rodolphus Lestrange,” the Death Eater replied tonelessly, as the wizards surrounding her nodded to indicate the Veritaserum was functioning correctly.

“Have you killed Enchantress Lilian Marie Potter nee Evans?”

“No.”

“Have you helped the real culprits to facilitate the murder of Enchantress Lilian Marie Potter?”

“No.”

“Have you coerced witches and wizards, blackmailed fellow magical beings, or participated in any deed having made this murder possible?”

“No.”

There were several seconds of silence as the ICW Judges waited for the effects of Veritaserum to dissipate.

“We expected better from you, Albus Dumbledore,” and the voice of the Luxembourgian judge was heavy with disappointment.

“I assure you...”

“I can see why there were so many counts of murder,” cut him the other wizard. “Did you try to put all your unresolved crimes of the decade on the accused? Don’t answer that. It is evident the entire case is empty, none of the basic investigation was done and you were involved in a trial which was nothing but a farce and an insult together. You votes, fellow judges?”

Seven green lights followed quickly in the air.

“Thank you. The charges and the judgement against Bellatrix Black-Lestrange are null and void, and therefore abandoned. The British Ministry of Magic will cease all hostile actions against this witch they unjustly accused and will reinstate her of all the titles, possessions, lands and privileges she was owed before her arrest. This is the judgement of this court, and our thanks to Mrs Black-Lestrange for having brought to our attention the dysfunctions of the British justice system.”

“Thank you, your Honour,” and Bellatrix Lestrange bowed before showing in mockery her naked arms to Dumbledore and leaving under the cheers of the public.

**3 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“You owe me a Galleon, by the way,” declared cheerfully Morag MacDougal.

Hannah Abbot swallowed the curse she had on her lips and threw one gold coin that the Ravenclaw girl caught in mid-air. It had seemed a sure bet Susan was not going to be interested for long in her new girlfriend a couple of weeks ago. Alexandra Potter was the total opposite of a what a Hufflepuff should stand for: she was never seen smiling in public, she could be quite cruel and cast vicious spells, she had no reluctance to kill, and it was a poorly-kept secret she only cared about House Ravenclaw because Flitwick was her Head of House and her friends were with her.

So when Morag had proposed her a bet this relationship wouldn’t be over by October 1st, Hannah had thought this was a Galleon easily won.

She was still trying to understand how the entire affair was not failing.

“They look so cute together, don’t they?”

“You’ve won, no need to rub the salt on the wound, MacDougal,” the Heiress of House Abbot grumbled. She still turned her head towards the statue where the two other girls embracing each other. Susan was wearing classic robes with water-protecting Charms, her red hairs shining against the lights of the torches in the first floor-corridor. Kissing her was the Exiled Queen, who today had pulled her hairs in a ponytail and had changed from the school uniform to Quidditch robes and gear. Their lips were joining, separating but never for long, before being joined again.

Hannah couldn’t help but feel a bit jealous...those two were making doe eyes at each other every time they came close. She had wondered more than once how the two could work their projects together. Daphne Greengrass had to project an icy will to make them work seriously when they were seated next to each other...

“I still think their relationship won’t last long. They have so little in common and it isn’t like they were friends in the first place! They just kiss, pet their hairs and kiss each other...”

“They have their priorities straight, I think,” Morag retorted with a large smile before idly asking. “Care to make another wager?

“No, thank you,” she wasn’t going to explain to her mother how she had dilapidated her pocket money in unsafe bets.

“Too bad,” smirked the other redhead witch, before shouting to the kissing girls. “Hey Alexandra, stop this or we’re going to be late! You have a Quidditch game to play!” Then she added between her teeth. “I wonder if the professional players would be amused if we brought them the photos...”

“I heard that!” exclaimed the raven-haired athletic girl. In second year, Alexandra Potter had been one of the smallest girls around, but she was catching up. Hannah knew the Ravenclaw was taller than her now, and she was only a few hairs shorter than Susan now. Besides, Susan had not been quiet about the fact her girlfriend had a very nice body... “Sorry Susan, duty and my loud-mouthed treacherous lieutenant are waiting...”

There was a last deep kiss, and Alexandra Potter seized the handle of the Nimbus 1500 which had been abandoned against one of the knight’s armour and rushed in long strides towards the great doors of Hogwarts’ entrance.

“Let’s play this game then,” Hannah thought she heard the Basilisk-Slayer mutters. “Before the weather gets worse...”

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By the time they were all ready and gathered in the main Quidditch locker room, most of the enthusiasm Alexandra had in her belly after kissing lengthily Susan had disappeared. And she had no need to open her mouth to know the six other players were sharing her consternation.

The source of their reluctance was not hard to hear. Despite the Silencing Charms, the distant sound of thunder could be heard. The wind raged and raged against the pitch stands’, and the acclamations of the spectators were lost in the torrent of rain falling on this humid and wet part of Scotland.

It was one thing to know Quidditch games were never reported, but the weather for this play promised to be extremely bad, even by Scottish winter weather’s standards. The upper years who had cast the weather-predictions had not overestimated the problem; in fact it looked like they had underestimated it.

And because it couldn’t possibly get worse, several umbrellas, mascots and other objects had escaped their owners’ hands and were now swept aside in this mini-cataclysm. Under the sun, any first year would have been able to evade these unwanted obstacles. Today, with the visibility reduced to what was before your nose? They would be lucky not to ram one in the first minutes...

“Okay, everyone,” began Roger Davies, fifth-year Prefect and Captain of their House’s Quidditch Team. “I know the weather conditions are not ideal.”

Yeah, it was the understatement of the day.

“Yes, we have never trained in this kind of weather. Yes, we have a cascade of our best players unable to be with us today for a lot of reasons.”

Bad school results, a cauldron exploding in someone’s face and what looked like an improper manipulation of a toxic plant in the greenhouses, to be accurate.

“I know many of you are uncomfortable with the starting positions I have given three days ago. I know what you are thinking, that your Captain has created a broken thing, a crippled team, in the hope the pros watching us will be impressed by our endurance and our resistance.”

Roger grimaced.

“And yes, Oliver Wood is a fanatic who has in all likelihood threatened his players with death if they don’t win this match.”

Chuckles and giggles were in everyone’s throat and the atmosphere relaxed.

“They have a better team than us, they fly better in these conditions and their Seeker has a broom we have no counter for, but...it does not matter! Slytherin won yesterday despite having a brand-new roster!”

Davies struck his chest and shouted.

“We are the heirs of Rowena Ravenclaw, double winners of the Quidditch Cup, and I prefer to eat dirt than to go to our Head of House and explain to him we have not done our utmost to engrave a third victory on the trophy! In the sky we will teach these Lions and the Boy-Who-Lived we fear nothing save fear itself! UP RAVENCLAW!”

“UP RAVENCLAW!” The six other players bellowed and they left the lockers behind.

Once outside, they rapidly regretted the warmth and the dryness of the interior quarters. The conditions had not gotten better in the ten-fifteen minutes they had awaited inside. In fact, it was getting worse and worse. The pitch ground, once a pristine green was becoming a mud pool as they walked on it. Her Quidditch boots were sinking in this brown liquid, and each stride gave you the impression you were going to lose it, slip or lose equilibrium somewhat. Not-so strangely, the hydra inside her body was extremely happy in this kind of environment. Lightning in the sky and a lot of rain to clean her scales, Alexandra felt that the great snake was very pleased by this unexpected development.

Madam Hooch arrived, ordered the two Captains to shake hands and final instructions were given.

The fourteen players went in the air and the game began. Roger Davies and Raymond Bradley charged in the centre of the pitch, but Johnson was faster than them and took possession of the Quaffle. Not for long though, as a Bludger from nowhere chose her for target, and the red ball flew in the air...Alexandra caught it and tried to zigzag before passing the ball to Davis...a move which was unfortunately intercepted by one Gryffindor Chaser.

The girl – in this rain it was impossible to give a name – slalomed and raced towards the Ravenclaw goals, but missed her shot largely, Grant Page took the Quaffle and the Gryffindor offensive was stopped this time.

Bradley had the ball, then Alexandra, then Davies...and their Captain lost the Quaffle seconds later, to one of their opponents’ Chaser...and this time the girl didn’t leave a chance to Grant. 10-0 for Gryffindor.

The rain made everything more difficult. In these conditions, it was best to forget precise trajectories, exquisite combined attacks and superb manoeuvres. The wind was throwing every broom off-course, the rain soaked their robes and killed their vision. Alexandra had transfigured her eyes into the snake irises of her inner animal, but force was to admit that if her vision was a bit improved, it remained extremely difficult to play Quidditch.

No, really they weren’t playing Quidditch. After several minutes, the enchantments on the old Quaffle were weakening, and the ball was more and more slippery to hold. Passes, feints and most of the skills used by Chasers were useless. This advantaged of course their team, for Gryffindor had a well-trained Quidditch machine, but it was galling nonetheless. Bludgers supposed to target opponent Chasers hunted the Beater’s own side. Missed shots were happening by the dozens.

Alexandra didn’t know how long they were in the air, but when violet sparks were cast over their heads, Gryffindor was leading 80-60.

“Wood demanded a time-out!” explained Davies with a tired expression. “We go under the umbrellas for a few minutes...”

The Ravenclaw Captain had not to repeat this suggestion twice. In a few seconds, they all tried to take refuge from the rain, Alexandra drew her wand and began to cast Warming and Drying Charms, imitated seconds later by Kurt Waltford.

“How fares the game?” asked Cho Chang, who had evidently missed most of the ‘fun’.

“We are losing by twenty points, Cho,” there was exhaustion and little enthusiasm in Davies’ voice. “But if you don’t catch the Snitch, we will still play tonight.”

Not that there would be too much difference, Alexandra suspected. There was so little light and so much rain that playing on this nice morning of October instead of during the night was not a big change.

“I don’t think I can catch the Snitch,” admitted the Asian Seeker, who like everyone looked like she had been thrown in a swimming pool with her Quidditch robes. “I’m not seeing further than my own broom. The Snitch is slower in these conditions, but its gold colour is impossible to see in this weather!”

“Then tail Longbottom and try to use him for your search,” advised Roger Davies. “If we manage to keep the score like this, whoever catches the Snitch will have the game in the bag and for today, I think I can live with that.”

Chang nodded and after a goblet of warm drink, they all re-mounted their brooms and flew in the storm. Lighting thundered over their heads and it was becoming more and more dangerous to play the game. Alexandra fought against the wind and managed to score her first goal, but celebrating it was out of the question as one Bludger decided her head was a superb thing to hit. 80-70 for Gryffindor, but who was counting?

Davies and Bradley scores one goal each, and one Gryffindor Chaser scores twice after them...and then the conditions became simply unplayable.

A Gryffindor – probably one of their Chaser – fell from the skies screaming in terror as her broom was on fire. All the players were too far to intervene, and the crash was particularly spectacular. Alexandra felt the hydra hiss in pleasure as more lightning thundered and scored another goal – why was Hooch not stopping this damn match, in the name of the Morrigan? Did the Flying Professor wanted to wait for one player to die?

Next up to slam into the stands was one of their Beaters – since they were still three blue players trying to seize the Quaffle. Five times the Bludgers tried to shatter her, and five times she avoided the murderous behaviour of the black balls...and then they all felt it.

Cold.

Terrible cold.

A cold embrace, one she had only felt once on the Hogwarts Express.

Suddenly all seemed very silent.

Cold and there was screaming.

There were figures falling from the sky and her hydra did the equivalent of a monumental roar of anger, shaking her long enough to restore her spirits and rush at the figures falling...but there were two of them and Alexandra knew there was simply not enough time to save both. One was blue, one was red...

Alexandra made her choice and pushed her magic into her Nimbus 1500, trying to boost its speed...she caught the arm of the falling Ravenclaw and used every strength she had to prepare for the shock...

It was still terrible and her arm hurt...but she was able to crash-land in an almost controlled manner on the pitch.

Almost.

For the first time in her short-lived Quidditch career, Alexandra discovered the disgusting taste of mud. The insult the Potter Heiress shouted was in five letters and was certainly not diplomatic. And the hydra hissed in laughter in her head.

“I hate the rain and I hate Quidditch...” The green-eyed witch spat, before stretching her legs and arms, felt some pain but was able to move every part of her body, and decided perhaps staying in this mud bath was not going to clean her.

Alexandra stood and came back to the point of impact...to see her Nimbus 1500 had literally been broken in half by her rescue attempt. The Ravenclaw player she had just rescued was revealed to be Cho Chang.

There were bright Patronuses hunting and forcing the Dementors to flee, their attempt to swarm the Quidditch game an utter failure. The brightest light was a phoenix, obviously, though there were a cat, a wolf and other different animals...

Two adult wizards were already helping her to stand, while a group of ten-eleven witches and wizards were already putting on a stretcher the Gryffindor player...and Alexandra realised with a sinking feeling it was Neville Longbottom who had fallen from his broom.

Distracted by this view, she turned to see the Ravenclaw Seeker had bent the knee.

“You saved my life...thank you, Alexandra.” She didn’t know what to say...and suddenly she felt a sort of magic thread striking her, her inner animal groaned and...oh, what the hell, she had promised herself to avoid the problems coming with Life-Debts...

“Come on, I could not let our star-player die in a Quidditch match like that...” She tried to joke, taking Cho Chang by the hands and helping her to stand up. “Davies and House Ravenclaw will need you for the rest of the season...”

“I’m sorry for your broom...”

Ah yes, her first broom...well...

“Bah,” she replied, trying not to sound too jaded, “it had a long career before me and it’s not worth a life. I will tell to Professor Flitwick to exhibit as a cherished artefact of our House...even if we will have to replay this match.”

“Err, may be not,” The Asian Seeker raised her right hand to reveal...the Golden Snitch.

Naturally, this was the moment Davies chose to land.

“Formidable! Incredible! Formidable!” And their Captain hugged them both, crying like a madman.

And though the voice of Lee Jordan was muffed by the rain and the thunder, Alexandra had the ears to listen to his last commentary of the stormy morning.

“Cho Chang caught the Golden Snitch! 250-120! RAVENCLAW WINS!”

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“That bitch,” shouted Leo. “That loathsome raven-bitch!”

From their seats in the Gryffindor scene, they had been perfectly able to watch the disaster. Neville had been in hot pursuit of the Snitch with the other Seeker on his heels when the Dementors had attacked. If there had been one, maybe their friend would have had a chance. Unfortunately, there was not one Dementor but sixty or seventy of the Dark Creatures, and this time Professor Rincewind had not been there to launch illegal flame- based spells at the guardians of Azkaban.

Neville had immediately fallen from his broom, pushing unwittingly the Snitch in the hands of the Ravenclaw Seeker.

For a second or two, they had felt hope as the Light magic of Professor Dumbledore and the Professors repelled the demons and one Ravenclaw player rushed to save the Gryffindor star-player...and then there had been horror, as the Chaser grabbed Cho Chang and let Neville fall to a certain doom.

“I knew we couldn’t trust this bitch! Potter is like her criminal father, always profiting from the crises and taking advantage of our problems...”

Ron nodded and opened his mouth to follow by an acceptable reply...except the words which came out of his mouth were not the ones he wanted to say.

“This bitch deserves to be punished!” He snarled in a voice he had difficulties to recognise as his. Why did he felt so light-headed? The world was moving and rolling... “She tried to hurt Neville, it’s only fair we return the favour...let’s take the Zonko’s spiked food and give her a taste of her own medicine...”

These words weren’t his...why did they feel so right? Why was his fist rising in anger like this?

“Neville will not be happy if we go against his plans...”

“He couldn’t predict this second version of Bellatrix the Death Eater was going to let him die! I bet you the Professors are going to let this killer go away with her crimes! We need to teach her that her actions won’t be tolerated and the moment she step a toe out of line, House Gryffindor will make sure she is expelled!”

Yes, it was simply inconceivable a Dark Ravenclaw was free while she had tried to murder the Boy-Who-Lived...

“In this case, let’s return to the castle,” said Leo. “I will go take what we need from the Zonko’s stocks, go back to the dorms and pick the Cloak...”

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“We are the Champions! We are the Champions! We are the Champions...OF THE WORLD!”

After the dark hours of Quidditch game under the torrential rain and the attack of the Dementors, the Ravenclaw students had decided it was best to banish the ugly memories brought by the monster and concentrate on what was truly important in real life.

Partying, singing, eating and drinking were among the favourite activities in display at this moment in the Great Hall. Most of the three Houses had decided to stay on and party as well, the boys and girls having all decided a time of joy and happiness was preferable to brood while the elements raged outside.

Most of the Quidditch managers, observers and players had already departed. According to Dumbledore, notices would be sent by owl to those the adults thought as promising players, but according to the rumours, nobody had managed to score a lot of points in the managers’ good books. Slytherin was rebuilding and still made huge mistakes before winning 280-170 against Hufflepuff. The Badgers had lost, and of course their own match had been played in a storm with half of their best players. Erin Moran had been one of the pro-spectators, Morag had told her after the match, and she had complimented her own desperate rescue of Cho. On the other side, the Irish Chaser had said ‘Alexandra should only play Chaser when there’s a lot of rain’.

Well she wasn’t wrong. In the end, she was just a Reserve Seeker, and in sunny conditions, Gryffindor would have massacred them. As it was, it had been a very near thing: Longbottom had been close to catch the Snitch when the Dementors had for an unfathomable reason decided to become the threat number one of the school.

“Should I be worried the rumours have some truth, Alexandra?” Susan chose to announce her presence by caressing her cheeks from behind.

“Rumours?” The third-year Ravenclaw didn’t like at all the sound of that and the mischievous expression of many of her fellow housemates wasn’t encouraging...

“The ones you are building yourself a harem of sexy girls,” purred the red-haired Hufflepuff and half of the table whistled or cheered, the traitors. “You know saving Chang over Longbottom has definitely said something about your preferences...”

“Oh come on, Susan, you aren’t...” A kiss on her lips forced her to interrupt her reply.

“Just promise me you will demand my authorisation if you want other girls in our bed,” her girlfriend added in a soft whisper against her ear, and Alexandra felt warm, real warm...and she didn’t fight at all the next kisses.

“We are the Champions! We are the Champions!”

“Today the game, tomorrow the Cups and next summer, the world tournament!”

“To the common room! We have another party to start!”

“Up Ravenclaw!”

“Up Ravenclaw!”

They climbed the corridors in a long and very loud column. The Hogwarts hymn was adapted and distorted, with many songs proclaiming the greatness of their victory. Alexandra, Susan, Morag, Hermione and Nigel were near the end of the procession, with Luna in the rear-guard. By the way, her hat was really funny: the symbol of Ravenclaw eating the Lion over and over was an impressive animation for a second-year. Several Hufflepuffs including Hannah Abbot also accompanied them; exceptionally Flitwick had accepted the divide between Houses could be amended a bit...

It took three times the duration of a normal day to arrive to their common room and there was so much ruckus Alexandra only heard the first words of Roger’s speech from afar...

“Ravenclaws, I raise my cup proud of the courage shown my players...”

And then the cheers died, instantly replaced by expressions of terror, they heard screams and shouts, the songs and the celebrations collapsing into horror.

“POISON! The food has been poisoned!”

“Go find Madam Pomfrey! Prefects, stop everyone to touch the drinks, they are poisoned!”

“Don’t touch that!”

“Go find Professor Flitwick!”

Something struck Alexandra and in a honed reflex she drew her wand and cast three offensive hexes at the empty space on her left.

The air shimmered, and suddenly Leo Black and Ron Weasley appeared out of nowhere, their faces harbouring terrified expressions.

“What have you done, imbeciles?”

The Lions were pranksters and completely unable to respect any rule, but surely they weren’t going to murder someone for a Quidditch game lost...

She seized the shivery piece of cloth and her hand glowed with a terrifying intensity. Sparkles of green lightning danced on her fingertips before coursing through her arm.

And suddenly, Alexandra knew with terrible certainty how the two members of the Golden Trio had been able to evade Prefects and Professors for so long during their nightly explorations. The hydra, which had been quite content to enjoy the party, raged and hissed, transmitting to her feelings of undiluted hatred.

“I should kill you right where you stand. You dare use my family’s Invisibility Cloak for your crimes...”

**4 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It was two in the morning, and the students had been sent to their beds. They had, after all, classes in a few hours. Or at least, that was the official reason they had used to send everyone back to their common rooms and enforce the curfew.

Dumbledore internally sighed.

The events which had happened on the third of October already were a monumental disaster, and he was probably underestimating the scale of the debacle. After yesterday, he had believed the worst news were behind them. After all, compared to Bellatrix Black walking away free from the ICW trial which had cleared her of all charges, how could things have gotten worse?

Asking this had apparently tempted Fate. Gryffindor House had lost its Quidditch match, but Dumbledore could have lived with that. The near-death of Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, had nearly stopped his heart. By good fortune though, one of his last spells had managed to slow the Boy-Who-Lived else the hero destined to fight Voldemort would have died here and there.

He had believed this was the worst outcome of the day. Merlin’s socks, even the fact the English managers didn’t think most of his students were good enough to become professionals had barely made him blink. These people had to be threatened to hand second-hand brooms to Hogwarts, he would not shed many tears for their impossible standards...

And then alarms had begun to sound. Students poisoned in the Common Room of House Ravenclaw, and two of young Neville’s friends arrested as they tried to flee the scene of the crime.

Fortunately, no student had died. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Flitwick had established good procedures for the Ravenclaw Prefects on the first days of the new year, and quick decisions had saved the five students who had drunk or eaten the altered drinks and meals.

But the situation had spiralled out of control. Because it seemed that no poison had been used, but special prank-foods of the new generation of pranks from Zonko’s. Pranks which were manifestly completely unsafe for selling to anyone, never mind innocent children. The afflicted students had vomited blood, suffered convulsions, saw their skin turn black and felt as if their insides burned with acid...and nobody had known if the basic antidotes were going to work!

The political and financial consequences of this tragedy were terrible, the human consequences promised to be worse.

And as a last dagger strike, he had learned Leo Black and Ron Weasley had been caught red-handed...with the Potter Invisibility Cloak, and Alexandra Potter had recognised it!

Dumbledore was not particularly inclined to believe to believe the disasters arrived in series of thirteen, but the last hours had been bad news after bad news. In his quality of Headmaster of Hogwarts, as a Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, as a once-respected member of the International Confederation of Wizards, as the Leader of the Order of Phoenix and for him personally in every aspect of his life.

The consequences, as he had already recognised the moment he received the news, were likely to be disastrous and cataclysmic for the Light and himself. If this had been the first incident of the decade, he might have been able to turn the table on some factions. The Dementors being near Hogwarts were obviously Fudge and his advisors’ fault. He had protested this decision and loudly. The rest could have been linked with this problem and presented as a Dark influence weighting on the minds of the students.

But the ‘Heir of Slytherin’ incident had burned too many bridges, soured too many relationships and brought several of his choices to a point of no-return. And he hadn’t had the time to mend differences with the neutrals or rebuild the destroyed relationships.

As he entered the Great Hall, he saluted one by one all the witches and wizards present tonight and the grim expressions told him that whatever decision was going to happen tonight, Albus would have to play hundreds of hours in damage-control and spend considerable influence to regain half of what his standing was on October 1.

For Hogwarts, he had obtained that the four Head of Houses were present, but given Filius’ wrathful expression, he knew he had no support to expect from the Charms Master. And by the looks of it, not from his Head of Hufflepuff...ah yes, there had been Badgers willing to participate in the Ravenclaw celebrations. Pomona was going to live this as a personal insult. Severus was scowling and his mind was retrenched behind his most powerful Occlumency shields. Minerva...she worried him. His deputy was looking like she was living a nightmare and had completely collapsed when she had learned some of her Lions were responsible for this heinous prank which had totally spiralled out of control.

The Board of Governors was of course here in full assembly. Led by Narcissa Malfoy, Lord Greengrass, Lord Goldstein, Lord Catterick, Lady Fawley, Lord Stebbins, Lord Woodcroft, Lord Kensington, Lord Smith, Lady Marsham, Lord Whitehead and Lord Vanity had Apparated to the castle as soon as they had known of the problem...and for all the alliances he had cultivated with many of them during his tenure as a Headmaster, few of them seemed to remember the past accords as he was presented with grim visages and vigilant gazes.

The DMLE and the Ministry had not decided to forget the event. A full squadron of Aurors was watching the gates, and Senior Auror Gawain Robards was fixing him with non-hidden disapproval. Next to him was the odious and bigoted toad-woman who had caused him so many problems during Potter’s guardianship audience, Umbridge or something like that.

Last, but certainly not least, were the guardians of the principal parties involved. For young Leo, it was his father Sirius. For Ronald, it was Molly and Arthur. Three of the poisoned students’ parents had come...and because this disaster was not going to be complete without her, Stella Zabini the Black Widow had invited herself, followed by half a dozen lawyers.

Yes, it was a catastrophe for his plans that so many people had been sent to Hogwarts to demand him explanations...and thank Merlin’s beard the children had been sent back to their Common Rooms. He certainly didn’t want young and impressionable minds to hear what was going to be discussed in the Great Hall.

“Minister Fudge recognises that sending the Dementors at Hogwarts without preparations was a grievous mistake,” declared from the start Gawain Robards, to most of the assembly’s stupefaction. “The guardians of Azkaban belong to Azkaban and are withdrawn back to the prison as we speak. The outer security of the castle will be assured by tomorrow by a company of regular ICW enforcers accompanied by troll guards.”

And like a move of his wand, Dumbledore knew the pressure he could apply to Fudge was going to be extremely limited, if not inexistent. The Senor Auror bowed and took a step back.

To his considerable dread, it was Narcissa Malfoy who advanced, and judging by her poise in a long traditional blue-green robe, she had evidently managed to become the spokesperson of the Board of Governors for tonight.

“Headmaster, the sanctity of a House’s common room is a principle all students of the noble institution known as Hogwarts are known to cherish from their first year to their seventh. Obviously, students who don’t belong to this House can’t enter, but the importance of tradition, protocol, and friendship impose the students demand the authorisation of this House’s Prefects to enter this sanctuary. Do you agree, Headmaster?”

In private, Dumbledore would have scoffed. Severus had told him many intra-House incidents in the dungeons that were extremely cruel and worth hundreds of hours in detention. Some boys were very lucky they were born in Noble Houses...

“I agree, Lady Malfoy.”

“Then you must appreciate my consternation and my anger, Headmaster, knowing dozens of innocent children saw this tradition trampled and destroyed. They were celebrating, they were enjoying a few hours of festivities before returning back to their studies and their classes...and two students decided that since they blamed a member of that House for an imaginary fault, the entire House was going to pay and the sanctity of the Common Room didn’t apply to them. Worse of all, they used a stolen heirloom – and apparently one you had given them, no less! – to enter by guile Ravenclaw Tower and pour forbidden substances in the foods and drinks prepared. And of course, they had no idea what kind of effect these substances could have, nor did they have on them any antidote available to cure the poisoned students.”

A few times he tried to see if the other members of the board would be willing to dissociate themselves from the blonde witch’s position, but a wall of Occlumency shields and dark glares answered him, even from the Lord and Ladies of the Light present. And so he was forced to ask the first question of a very long and unpleasant list.

“What is the recommendation of the Board for Mr. Ronald Weasley?”

Inside, he felt a non-negligible amount of dread for the youngest son of the Weasley family. The feud between House Malfoy and House Weasley had always been bad, and the wife of Lucius Malfoy had little reasons to feel generous.

“The Board is prepared to accept Mr. Ronald Weasley may not be entirely responsible for his actions of last night,” declared with what appeared to be great reluctance the pure-blood witch. “According to his testimony and the preliminary investigation, he has described being afflicted with several symptoms often described when under double-layered Compulsions. Mind-Healers of Saint Mungo’s are going to examine him in a few hours.”

By Morgana’s dark shadow, this was really good news. The irony of a Malfoy being forced to innocent a Weasley due to mind-altering spells was incredible, but he was not going to let it pass. Though the big question remained who had cast said Compulsions...

“The Board is forced to conclude Mr. Weasley’s actions were not done of his own volition during these last hours. However, a consensus has been reached the actions of Mr. Weasley from September 1 to October 2 are absolutely unworthy of a Hogwarts’ student. In less than two months, Gryffindor third-year Ronald Weasley has already received fifteen detentions, cost his House over eighty points and participated in the trade of illegal Zonko’s goods. Thanks to Professor Severus Snape, many hideouts of illegal prank items, alcohol and forbidden texts were found inside Hogwarts with Mr. Weasley’s writing or signature. The poisoning of yesterday is sadly not an exceptional event of a good student being led astray by malicious Compulsions.”

“Not to mention that by his own words, the Invisibility Cloak was used dozens of times to break the school rules and for malicious purposes,” the murmur Snape used to deliver the sentence was filled with loathing.

Narcissa Malfoy nodded once, before summoning a roll of parchment waiting in Lord Greengrass’ hands.

“The Board of Hogwarts is not heartless, but the list of charter violations, petty bullying, and illegal spell’s use in the corridors is completely beyond the limits we are willing to tolerate. And we have proof Mr. Ronald Weasley was willing to become an unregistered Animagus, ignoring all laws and protections relative to this dangerous ability...”

Lord Goldstein advanced and was handed the parchment by Narcissa Malfoy. Dumbledore stood stone-faced, but in his mind he winced at the look his ally was sending him. Goldstein’s son was a third-year Ravenclaw, and all benevolence he could have awaited from the wealthy Lord yesterday was now ashes in the wind. Anthony Goldstein had not been one of the Ravenclaw poisoned, thank Merlin for that, but he could very well have been one. This was going to put enormous strain in the ranks of the Order...

“Mr. Ronald Weasley is hereby suspended for the next three months of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Two Mind-Healers and a Ministry-approved inspector will regularly visit his residence for this period in order to ensure this incident will have no more grave consequences.”

“So Mr. Ronal Weasley will be free to return to Hogwarts by January 1994?” The Chief Warlock asked. It was not the worst outcome, though he would need to talk with Arthur and Molly to impress their son with the importance of his studies. A short sum-up from Minerva five days ago had told her young Ronald was failing half of his classes.

“Under certain conditions,” warned Lord Greengrass, his emotionless persona dominating his surroundings. “No stepping out of bonds will be tolerated anymore. Mr. Weasley is banned from every extra-curricular activity for the rest of his school years at Hogwarts, including Quidditch games and Hogsmeade week-ends. These activities are rewards for the students, and Mr. Weasley has proved beyond doubt he does not deserve them. Needless to say, Mr. Weasley is also banned from all positions of authority over his fellow students like the Prefect position. Given his family’s...precarious financial situation, we will limit the sum of the fines to one hundred Galleons. But a black mark will be written on his criminal record, trying to become an Animagus is not a small and unimportant prank. That Mr. Weasley was caught before truly becoming one is not an excuse...there will be several interviews for him and we sincerely hope he will realise the seriousness of his actions.”

Arthur and Molly’s visages were divided between relief and consternation. It was not difficult to understand why...Merlin’s wand, he would have to pay the one hundred Galleons of fine for them.

“Now let’s speak about Mr. Leo Black?” Sirius slightly growled, but couldn’t do anything else as his cousin returned to the front with several rolls of parchment.

“While Mr. Weasley has Compulsions to explain his behaviour, Mr. Black has no such excuse. And it is obvious by his school disciplinary records that Heir Leo Black is now uncontrollable...”

“You dare...” started Sirius.

“Yes, I dare, Lord Black,” the eyes of the last descendants of House Black glared at each other. “For every accusation directed against Mr. Weasley, there are twice more directed against your son and Heir. Leo Black has been the mastermind behind several vicious incidents since the beginning of this year, and sadly there is a lot of evidence this cycle of violence escalation is not something he feels really guilty about. There is also the fact that while Mr. Weasley could plead ignorance concerning several laws and edicts made by the Wizengamot, Mr. Leo Black, as the scion of a Noble and Most Ancient House, was well-aware of them. This young man had his suspicions when you gave him this Cloak, Headmaster. And he deliberately chose to keep it and help his friends break the school rules instead of returning it to his legitimate owners.”

Thank Merlin and Morgana, young Leo had decided to protect Neville...as it stood the reputation of the Boy-Who-Lived and future bannersmen for the Light would be intact.

“This is a lot of speculation,” replied Sirius. “We will see if it sticks in front of a justice court...”

“Hem, hem...” Oh Merlin’s socks, the vapid Ministry flunky had decided to intervene. “Under orders from Minister Fudge, I am under orders to tell you Lord Black a trial would be...ill-advised.”

“I have the right to defend my son!” roared the Lord of House Black.

“Yes, making these threats in front of the Chief Warlock...”

“Hem, hem...you misunderstand my words, *Headmaster*,” said the horrible-looking woman. “Given the...extensive scale of the smuggling, the lack of testing done by Zonko’s employees, the sheer negligence shown by Lord Black...should we go for a trial, Minister Fudge will be forced to demand you imprisonment at the fortress of Azkaban for ten years.”

Sirius’ eyes went from the frog-woman to Narcissa Malfoy with a horrified expression before becoming more and more furious. Albus Dumbledore had to give him an imploring expression not to make things worse. He hadn’t had the time to see if the laws supported the Ministry official, but it was probable they did.

“And what is your...proposition?”

“The Board suspends Heir Leo Black until the end of the school year, and he will be regularly inspected by the Department of Education’s examiners. The same sanctions pronounced against Mr. Weasley will be applied to him.”

“This is ridiculous! You are sabotaging an entire year of education of my son!”

“No, Lord Black!” the outburst came from Lady Fawley. “Your son sabotaged himself and tried to poison students with an heirloom that was never his to own! What would you say if we raided your home, tried to kill you and before leaving stole several valuable paintings and enchanted objects?”

“You would be neutralised by my wards so I don’t think...”

“Hem, hem...Lady Fawley is correct, the magnitude of the damage done by your shop and your decisions is severe, Lord Black,” by Merlin, he was really beginning to loath this voice. “The danger of the brand-new range of products we found at Hogwarts can’t be underestimated. A full Ministry inspection is going to begin at Zonko’s...we can’t tolerate murderous fireworks, poisonous sweets, and acid-spitting projectiles, after all, hem, hem...”

“I’m sure...” he tried to speak but Narcissa Malfoy interrupted him before he had the time to begin a tirade to give second chances to the Gryffindor students.

“Leo Black is well on his way to break the record of detentions per year ever given to a student and it is obvious he feels only disgust for the rules, whether they are from the Hogwarts charter or proclaimed by the Ministry.”

“Is it not putting the chariot before the hippogriff?” retorted Sirius, who was clearly out of patience. “The authority of your Ministry doesn’t authorise you to take such liberties with House Black...”

The frog-woman sniffed.

“It is, of course, your right to protest the Ministry’s orders and propositions, Lord Black. But I will...suggest you accept the proposition of Minister Fudge. You can accept your son’s suspension, and pay two thousand Galleons to each of the five students who were poisoned due to your son’s actions. To save face, the Ministry is willing to allow an exceptional closure of all Zonko’s branches to clean your businesses and organise the destruction of all the dangerous products you were prepared to sell to innocent clients. A fine of sixty thousand Galleons will be applied for the incident of yesterday, but you will not suffer more negative press...”

“Or?”

The parents and guardians of the victims watched Sirius with loathing expressions.

“Hem, hem...or we go to the justice courts...which I can say if you’re judged guilty, can send both you and your son to Azkaban for ten years and pay several millions of fine...”

Albus was ready to jump on the great tables and tell Sirius to stop being stubborn. With Bellatrix free to return to Britain in a few days, the last thing the Light needed was to have the Lord of House Black and his Heir at Azkaban...the scenario of the two Black Sisters taking the reins of House Black and returning it to the Dark would be a political and propaganda nightmare...

“I will pay your fines...but don’t think I will forget this.”

“I think most of the problems have been dealt with,” Albus knew it wasn’t over, but the entire debate had already badly weakened his position...if only he could organise the second meeting in different circumstances... “It is already late and we are...”

“No,” and Stella Zabini swiftly came forwards as Lady Malfoy and the rest of the parents retreated. As usual, the woman had dressed like a vulgar prostitute, though unfortunately today, she had done it with symbolism...her robe was blue and bronze.

“It is not up to House Zabini to decide what...”

“Oh for once in your life, shut up Dumbledore!”

The sheer audacity of the whore...how dared she...

“If you know what is good for you and your minion of House Black, you are going to pay, Chief Warlock. I don’t know how you circumvented the oaths of the Wizengamot to steal heirlooms of a Most Ancient House, and I’m sure the Lords and Ladies will be interested to your justifications at the next session.

But you stole from my ward, and unlike you I take my duties seriously.”

“James Potter let me borrow his Invisibility Cloak before he revealed his true colours!”

“How convenient...for you,” commented coldly the Black Widow of the Wizarding World. “But I note you used the word ‘borrow’. When did you plan to give back this class-11 artefact to its legitimate owner?”

Never, if he had the choice. The Cloak was one of the three Hallows, and far too useful to protect Neville Longbottom and his friends against Death Eaters sympathisers for him to return it in the hands of a murderer. The Cloak was impossible to summon and nearly every detection spells was useless, it was a priceless strategic asset...

“I was planning to return it when she was of age,” he finally said.

“I would advise you to lie better next time,” a lawyer approached and handed the seventh-widowed witch another piece of parchment she unrolled. “By your own admission, you literally ignored the Wizengamot’s regulations and failed to return the Cloak to the Potter Family vault before the deadline of one week after the death of Lady Lilian Potter. So you are going to pay the compensation to my ward, Heiress Alexandra Potter, or tomorrow morning I will depose a suspensive motion before all the Houses of the Grey, Dark and Light in front of the Wizengamot and explain to them why we need to find another Headmaster of Hogwarts, another Chief Warlock and another Grand Sorcerer.”

“You have not the power to...” A pain began to pierce in his arm...the weight of the Wizengamot oaths binding him.

“My ward gave me full authority to deal with you...” the expression on Zabini’s visage was lacking mercy or any positive emotion. “She really, really didn’t like how you misplaced her possessions. By the way, you wouldn’t know where her family’s Pensieve has disappeared to, don’t you?”

“I don’t have it,” and he was certainly not going to help this whore to recover it, by Merlin!

“Naturally, you don’t,” it was clear by the tone she employed the Black Widow didn’t believe him. “Since we have established your position is untenable, here is my proposition. From November 9 1981 to October 3 1993, you were in possession of the Potter Invisibility Cloak, and despite all your vows and your speeches inciting to erase the problems created by the war, you never returned it. According to my helpers, that makes three thousand nine hundred and eighty-one days you ‘borrowed’ this class-11 artefact.”

In hindsight, he should have sent back organised a fatal accident for the spawn of James Potter...too bad it was too late now. He couldn’t afford the chaos it would unleash anymore...but the moment the wheels of destiny turned...

“We all know the crime this Invisibility Cloak was employed to commit yesterday, and I wonder how many more will come to the light of day now that we know what to search for,” yes , he really didn’t like where the Black Widow was going. “I think that between the penalties’ interest, the violations of your oaths and the importance of the heirloom you failed to respect...yes, I think a sum of one thousand and one hundred Galleons will be acceptable for my ward...”

“One thousand and one hundred Galleons?” But this was pocket change! She had made such a long speech for this bauble. Yes, he was going to pay this fine and after that laugh at her stupidity!

“One thousand and one hundred Galleons *per day*, Headmaster.”

For a few heartbeats, his mind went blank. No, he had not heard right. It was an error. No, no, no...but the venomous smirk Stella Zabini told her she was extremely serious.

And the pain in his arm grew stronger as his Wizengamot vows compelled him to respect the words he had sworn so long ago.

He cast rapidly a charm to calculate the sum, and the number which appeared made his lungs dolorous.

Four million, three hundred seventy-nine thousand and one hundred Galleons.

“This is an extravagant sum,” he declared in his best conciliatory voice.

“The length of your ‘lease’ was also extravagant,” the whore threw him back the ball without any sympathy.

“You are fighting to give a mountain of gold to the daughter of a...”

“Don’t go there, Headmaster,” the Black Widow began to levitate piles of parchment in his direction. “You lost all rights to judge my ward long ago. Now will you pay or must I involve the Wizengamot in this matter?”

He was going to pay, and she knew it. The Dark and the Grey were going to go for his throat if she went at them with this evidence, and he could not afford a battle like the one the Black Widow promised. Not when Bellatrix Black was waiting on the other side of Channel to make her triumphant return...damn Crouch to involve his name in fabricated and trumped-up charges.

Meagre consolation, he had been the twelfth wealthiest wizard of Britain before today, with close to twenty-three million Galleons, so he could definitely afford this ruinous fine of four million-plus gold coins...but this was going to impact severely his reserves, at a moment where he was urging his supporters to fund the Order and leading by example.

“I will pay...but I will not forget this, Lady Zabini.” By the end of the decade, the woman would be sent to Azkaban for her crimes, he was ready to swear it on his magic.

“Good, I would be extremely disappointed in you if I was forced to demand an eight million-fine for the return of the Potter Pensieve next year.”

The prostitute-clothed Lady raced out of the Great Hall, but her group of lawyers began to circle around him like a flight of vultures...

Truly, everything had exploded in the worst possible manner...he was really to need this bottle of fifty-year old Firewhiskey he kept for dire times...

“Hem, hem...the Minister feels concerned by your lack of involvement in the Grand Sorcerer position...”

**4 October 1993, near Hogsmeade, Scotland**

“I must admit I doubted the Queen’s words when Her Majesty said a few Compulsions could be more devastating than the Imperius.”

“And now?

“Now, I recognise my mistake, Knight Summoner.”

“Good.”

The red-robed figure disappeared from the hill, leaving no clue it had ever been there.

The violet-robed woman stayed alone, watching Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. From her location, the lights of the castle were powerful...but these beacons were tiny in the night. It was something to remember for the future, assuredly.

Uttering an incantation in a dark language long consigned to oblivion, Knight Necromancer unlocked the protections of her mask and let her robes shift into something more pleasant to the eye.

“Will you recognise the warning shot of the new war, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, Defeater of Grindelwald?”

Emotions were a weakness for those who practised Necromancy, but tonight she was going to allow herself a few giggles. Tonight she saw a reason to celebrate and she was going to enjoy it.

“Will you recognise it, *brother*?”