**Chapter 70**

**Potions or Explosion**

**3 March 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Sometimes Alexandra wondered why their teachers felt the need every February to increase the homework pile so much. Wouldn’t it be more logical to give them a constant number of essays per month? This tactic of beginning slow in September and burying them under the theories of long-dead wizards was stressful for everyone, and were always followed by a lot of screams and sobs once in the Common Room or the dorms. And of course, their group had Hermione getting more and more agitated day after day.

Sometimes, Alexandra wanted to go shouting at their teachers to tell them exams weren’t the end of all things and that they may try to make some subjects a bit more attractive. Alas, apart from Professor Flitwick, the green-eyed teenager wasn’t in good enough term with the rest of the staff to tell them what she thought of their methods.

But as the sun began to wane on the other side of their headquarters’ room, the subject the four Exiled went to debate upon was not the exams, though the reason they were just four at the moment was related to it. As much as learning elemental spells was fun, they couldn’t disregard grades and academic performances at the first opportunity. Even Luna Lovegood had been caught studying many times in the last weeks. The charge of homework was indiscriminate in its targeting: every House and every year was feeling the strain, though naturally the older the student, the worse it got.

This made her remember she had promised to Penelope to make an attempt to convince another overachiever. She would have to do it soon, else her attempt would be doomed before the first word left her mouth.

But there were more pressing things to speak about. There were always were, at Hogwarts.

“At least,” Morag commented, “we know why the last issues of the *Loud Duck* and the more...politically offensive publications of the *Daily Prophet* have not met any success during the last two months. You have to admit Alexandra, it’s ingenious.”

“I suppose,” the Potter Heiress conceded. As the Irish girl raised her eyebrows before a more expressive taunt, the black-haired Ravenclaw nodded. “Yes, it’s ingenious, especially if you love loopholes.”

The Headmaster of Hogwarts was a former Gryffindor, but he wasn’t completely an idiot. He knew he couldn’t open every package and intercept every owl travelling to the Scottish castle. First, because he lacked the means of this information war: it would require all the teachers working during their school hours to have enough wands available, and the Defeater of Grindelwald would never be able to go overseas or to London playing his games if he was forced to stand watch for mail interceptions. Secondly there would be a mass revolt of students before long, and plenty of Wizengamot members had sons and daughters at Hogwarts.

So Dumbledore was using a sort of magical tampering instead. Every owl which passed through the Hogwarts wards was ‘marked’ with a sort of runic-based signature, and if it entered contact with a non-approved newspaper or magazine, it was going to produce a variant of a Notice-me-not Charm. For a duration varying between ten to twenty-four hours, it was difficult to find any interest in what you were reading. Your eyes were getting tired, other topics the average student didn’t like to discuss suddenly became utterly fascinating...the list was long and they hadn’t completed their analysis of the ward.

“It’s also completely illegal,” Alexandra added after a few seconds of silence.

“Debatable,” the MacDougal Heiress shrugged. “It is not a compulsion. It doesn’t alter your mind in any way. Notice-me-not Charms or incantations inspired from them are usually used against Muggles, so weak manipulations like this one are a very grey area.”

“Damn this silver-haired politician,” she swore, “damn him!”

At times like this, it was easy to remember why Albus Dumbledore had remained for decades on the top spot of Magical Britain politics. In one feat, he had severely weakened a potential source of opposition and discovered a method he could use to mitigate many problems he would face in the future. It had certainly not been an easy magical feat to prepare – otherwise there were several situations he would have already used it before – but for now even if the Daily Prophet and Rita Skeeter announced Albus Dumbledore had killed one hundred wizard and witches in cold blood, there would be no immediate outrage.

Of course it didn’t make the news disappear like magic. But it gave him control.

“What are we going to do?” asked Nigel, a gloomy expression on his face.

“This insidious attack is tampering with the newspapers coming from the owls, whether they are coming from London or the school itself don’t matter. So we will have just to avoid using owls and see what other methods of communication the mighty Chief Warlock has compromised.”

“I doubt he has something to prevent House Elves from coming to Hogwarts,” Morag proposed.

“Why not do it ourselves?” Hermione countered, her eyes still burning with righteous anger.

“Because if we’re caught, the Headmaster’s edicts are still in place to make us regret this course of action?” Nigel asked rhetorically before shaking slowly his head. “As much as the *Loud Duck* is important to me, I really don’t want to see if expulsion is really on the table.”

“We could also test with different types of birds,” Morag shuffled through her pile of parchments. “We have only seen work on owls, because let’s be honest, it’s the most common messenger-bird used on the British Isles. But owls aren’t the only birds which can carry our mail.”

“True, but I don’t know if there are many available for loaning or purchase,” Alexandra said pessimistically. She had visited Diagon Alley and several other locations in the last three years, and owls were the overwhelming choice when one wanted to buy a bird. There were some big prey birds which sometimes arrived on the market, but they were a rarity. And for this one, France’s alleys would be of no help. Everybody used owls on the other side of the Channel too. “I will look into it, I suppose. We can also test if this tampering works when the newspaper is transfigured into something else when it goes through the wards.”

“Clever,” approved Morag. “Making sure it works for dozens of newspapers would be tricky though.”

Several parchments were covered in green ink by the time they had to leave their headquarters and return to the Great Hall for dinner.

“You know, in cases like this I can understand why the man infuriates the Dark so much,” the red-haired witch told her as the result of their late afternoon’s activities was stashed in their bags or burned.

“Let’s be honest, if he wasn’t so ridiculously powerful and skilled, people would have dealt with him long ago.” Dumbledore’s political ideas were either ridiculously naive, or hopelessly ill-explained, and totally self-serving. Worse, this had begun decades ago and it had not gotten better since. Obviously, during the last war he had ‘won’...somehow. But then, his enemies included psychopathic blood-purists who were also hopelessly out of touch with reality and a Dark Lord more interested in using Unforgivables than rallying the moderates to his cause.

The more she learned about it, the more Alexandra thought the Ministry of Magic and magical society had been incredibly lucky compared to what could have happened. An insane Voldemort had been bad enough to brink the Ministry on its knees, despite hundreds of mistakes. A competent one would have been far difficult to handle...and probably would have emerged triumphant in the end.

The only obstacle was Albus Dumbledore. But Voldemort had never tried to assault Hogwarts or battle personally the Defeater of Grindelwald once it became clear the older wizard had far more skill than him.

“We should find something big on him. Something that will give us the time to train and oppose him more directly,” Hermione stated.

Alexandra gave her friend a dubitative expression.

“Somehow, I don’t think Dumbledore is going to make a colossal mistake like he did with my Cloak,” mistakes like these one generally came once or twice during a life. If the man had indeed grabbed her Pensieve, the heirloom had long departed Hogwarts. It would be the height of madness for the Chief Warlock to keep it somewhere she could potentially discover it...

There were descending the great stairs when they saw the Headmaster. And he was not alone. Surrounding him were half a dozen wizards, ranging from thirty years-old in looks to ‘as ancient as the Chief Warlock’.

One in particular attracted Alexandra’s attention. Like many of his fellows, he was old and bald. Unlike the majority, however, he was also fat. He couldn’t challenge Vernon Dursley in a contest of obesity, but his belly was very round. He also had a large and well-kept silvery moustache, and his robes looked extremely expensive, embroidered with gold and in a dominant Slytherin-green colour.

Since Dumbledore and the rest of this group were busy remembering the good old times, the four Ravenclaws went to the Hall and their House table.

“I think the fat one with the big moustache was Snape’s predecessor at Hogwarts and Head of House of Slytherin,” she whispered as they sat down.

“Professor Horace Slughorn,” Morag pronounced the name. “The other wizards must be Potions Masters, then.”

“The third preliminary is about Potions,” Hermione whispered in a far better mood. Alexandra could understand her enthusiasm. In a classroom, with instructions written on the black board, the busy-haired Ravenclaw’s advantage was not that great. But in a situation where the odds of victory rose with each Potion correctly memorised in several years? Here their bookworm friend’s large memory was giving her a neat advantage...

“Assuming it is for this week-end, it isn’t going to leave us a lot of time to prepare...”

**5 March 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“You were wrong. Snape didn’t choose to include the black flames of the Forbidden Corridor,” Hermione told her in a smug voice.

“I am not infallible,” Alexandra shrugged, “and after the Temple of Plants and the Devil’s Snare, I thought there was a chance we were going to deal with the black or the purple flames.”

Therefore all the five Ravenclaws participating had looked at the instructions to realise a Flame-freezing Potion or some magical recipe allowing a wizard or a witch to cross enchanted fire unarmed.

Unfortunately, it looked she had been wrong. There were no flames in view when they were authorised to return to the Great Hall after breakfast. It was not surprising. If there had truly been infernos involved, the preliminary would certainly have taken place on the Quidditch field again, not inside Hogwarts’ walls.

And aside knowing it was going to involve Potions – the dozens of standard-sized cauldrons disposed on the familiar Potions’ preparation tables were a massive clue – there was little evidence of what the trial consisted in.

There were also more judges today. The Temple of Plants had two Spanish Herbology Masters in addition of their Headmaster, Bagman and Crouch to give out the marks, but today the trio of wizards was accompanied by no less than seven Potions Masters, with the rest of the men and women they had seen two days ago serving as referees and observers.

The names of the judges were announced first, naturally. And though the exception of Sinclair and Slughorn – which were Grey these days - most were household names deeply associated with the light factions of the Wizengamot. It wasn’t very subtle...

“Horace Slughorn!”

“Elwood Don!”

“Gerard Curzon!”

“Lewis Woodcroft!”

“Julian Cole!”

“Stanley Cromarty!”

“Peter Sinclair!”

“Department Head of International Cooperation Bartemius Crouch!”

“Department Head of Games and Sports Ludovic Bagman!”

“Headmaster Albus Dumbledore!”

The referee names were Light-aligned too, though far less prestigious. And Alexandra thought one or two names had already been mentioned in the *Daily Prophet* when the rumour-mongering Rita Skeeter and her colleagues were busy ‘informing’ the people the standards of Potions Mastery were slipping.

“Welcome, welcome to the third preliminary for the extraordinary European Magical Tournament!” And here came Ludovic ‘call me Ludo’ Bagman again. Murder was not something to be contemplated lightly, but Alexandra swore that if she learned the man commented the tournament next year, she was going to make sure the man disappeared before September.

At least with this preliminary in the Great Hall, he couldn’t use Sonorous without destroying the ears of the participants and the public.

“I’m sure you are all ready to show the public your talent in Potions!” Morag snickered next to her, and all the Slytherins without exception sneered. On their right, two-thirds of the Gryffindors had turned green or looked incredibly nauseous.

“Look at Snape,” Hermione murmured. Alexandra gave the ‘dungeon bat’ – as the Gryffindors called him – a glance. Indeed, the Head of House Slytherin was harbouring a sneer which could only be qualified of ‘very pleased’.

“I’m sure the Lions are bitterly regretting all the moments they spent pranking the Snakes during the last years,” Alexandra replied in a whisper. Apart from Fred and George, she was confident few Gryffindors were going to achieve an ‘A’ on their OWLs. And no wizard or witch wearing the red-gold emblem was going to be accepted in the advanced course for the NEWTs by the Senior and Junior Potions Master. To dream otherwise would be the height of stupidity.

“Your goal is extremely simple, dear champions! Using nothing but your skill in Potions, your goal will be to open the *Red Boxes*!”

Unlike the ‘Jewels of Victory’, Alexandra had no difficulties admitting the objects which were levitated on small podiums between the potion tables and the warded area reserved to the judges deserved their name this time. They were indeed red-coloured rectangular boxes, very similar in size and shape to the ones one could order from Honeydukes or any other Hogsmeade and Diagon’s shop.

And they were a very bright red Alexandra very vividly remembered having seen in the Alchemy books she had read from Cho Chang and Daphne Greengrass.

“Cho,” the green-eyed Ravenclaw muttered just loud enough to be sure the older black-haired Ravenclaw heard her. “The Class II-transmutation of Copper, Autolian, is supposed to have exactly that colour...”

“Yes,” soberly answered the other girl.

“Damn,” Roger Davies grumbled a bit louder. “It’s not going to be easy opening one of those...”

This was probably the understatement of the century. Alchemic-transmutated substances were on average many, many times more resistant to magical attacks. Fortunately for the enemy of Alchemists, mass-production was also hellishly consuming in time and money. But those boxes were there, and it was incredibly evident there was no keyhole or any other sort of flaw to open it.

“These Red Boxes are extremely resistant, as they’re made of Alchemic Autolian!” Bagman boasted a second later, confirming her hypothesis and generating a wave of cheers towards Dumbledore – because who else among the judges could have created these boxes?

Alexandra had to give it to the silver-haired Chief Warlock; it was going to be a large boost to his reputation and a warning in one move. Just by creating these boxes, the Headmaster had reminded everyone he was a renowned Alchemist *and* he had no reluctance throwing a little fortune in Galleons away for this event.

“Today is a Free-Brewing Contest! Your task is to open your *Red Box*, using all your knowledge of Potions!” Bagman beamed like he was doing it every morning and Alexandra and her hydra impulses were in common agreement that the more the ex-Beater talked, the more the urge to punch him became hard to suppress. “Naturally, you are forbidden to use your wand to cast spells against the Box! You can however use it to help you in the preparation of your Potions! And obviously to make things more exciting, we have added a time-limit! Open your Red Box in less than four hours or you will have failed to complete the preliminary!”

“Does that means everyone who fails to open the Red Box in four hours will get a zero?” asked nervously Angelina Johnson. The athletic Chaser looked far less confident now than she had been in front of the Temple of Plants. Clearly facing your worst subject was not a reason to be excited from a Lion’s perspective.

“No, of course not!” Ludo Bagman tried to reassure her with one of his large smiles. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed, there are a lot of referees, observers and judges who are here to watch your exploits today! They will analyse your attempts and your self-control in this atmosphere of competition, and the judge will take it into account for your final marks!”

True, but a successful competitor was always going to receive more points than an unsuccessful one.

Cedric Diggory was the next student to raise his hand.

“Where are the ingredients we are supposed to use?” the tall Hufflepuff boy demanded to the judges.

It was apparently the correct question to ask, as massive rolls of parchment were summoned and levitated next to every table, where they unfurled.

“The list of ingredients at your disposal for this great preliminary!” the former member of the English Quidditch team explained cheerfully. “The number written next to the name is the quantity of it you are authorised to ask for in the next four hours. Touch the name with your wand or your finger, and the ingredient will be instantly sent by the House Elves on your Potions worktable!”

Yes, like the food they ate every meal in the Great Hall.

“To discourage inter-House quarrels, fighting and sabotage, ward-barriers will separate each Champion once the trial truly begins.”

That was good, fantastic even. Being cursed in the back had been tried last time, but it had been nowhere as dangerous as a full-scale battle in the middle of the cauldrons.

“What about other Champions trying to copy the efforts of others?” Theodore Nott asked, turning to sneer in the direction of the Gryffindor boys and girls. Alexandra rolled her eyes in exasperation. This was not going to end well...

“Copying is not forbidden, of course!” Bagman replied with a chuckle before the Gryffindor-Slytherin had the opportunity to explode once more in words and duels. The Potter Heiress raised an eyebrow and she was sure she wasn’t the only one. Cheating so brazenly was authorised? Yes, this was a Tri-Wizard tradition, but come on...

“But please keep in mind,” the ex-Beater advised, “that the ward-barriers are transparent. The judges and the referees will see all your actions. If your Potion fails and the knowledge of it was acquired in a very questionable manner...well, I would say your grades are going to be reflective of the judges’ opinion.”

“More questions?” No one raised his or her hand to ask for further precisions. “Excellent! Choose a Potions table, then! We suggest to the students of the same Houses to not choose cauldrons side-by-side. Ah, and a last warning. While the referees and the security personnel want to keep a high non-interference policy, they can and will stop you if your cauldrons are dangerous for you and your surroundings.”

Alexandra tied her hair into a ponytail and walked to a cauldron far to her left. She had no wish to have Albus Dumbledore before her for the next four hours. Legilimency or no Legilimency, there were things you couldn’t be too careful about.

As she cast two cleaning spells on the cauldron just to be sure, the Potter Heiress did her best not to grimace when she was who had chosen the Potions workplace next to her. On her right, the unwelcome figure of Ronald Weasley. On her left was Leo Black. Only behind her the neutral visage of Hufflepuff Eurig Cadwallader could be taken as a sign of normality.

The two third-year Gryffindors’ eyes were filled with loathing.

Alexandra ignored them after a few seconds. It wasn’t like they could touch her, never mind hurt her here. They had been suspended because a lethal prank against her had turned for the worse; if they tried again, it would be expulsion and likely a trial in front of the Wizengamot.

“BEGIN!”

Instinctively, she touched the enchanted parchment to ask for gloves and the various protections every Potion student was supposed to wear. Alexandra also cast several Charms to ensure there was nothing on her which could contaminate unstable ingredients.

Right, now the big question: did she know a Potion which was specifically ‘tailored’ to pierce a protection of Autolian?

The answer, she admitted after three or four seconds, was likely a sound and resounding no. With her wand, this would have been done in two or three minutes. Autolian was resistant, but two Fulmen Imperator spells in quick succession would have rapidly disintegrated any magical immunity it had.

And the Potions curriculum from first to third year was nearly useless in such circumstances. Yes, it was all well and good to know how to brew antidotes and Sleeping Draughts, but against something that wasn’t poisoned and could not be physically debilitated...

“I’m very happy Potions isn’t my favourite class...” she grumbled before listing the Potions that she had memorised but for some reason rarely found their way on the Potions Class. “Elixirs...no...Antidotes...no...Draughts...no...”

Seriously, it was not good. Having an Alchemy-forged object you couldn’t even analyse properly – because of course that would require her wand and doing wandless magic in front of thousands of people was showing off – was a neat handicap.

There were several acids you could ‘accidentally’ create from the failed soup of a Potion. But the referees would certainly intervene and dissuade her from continuing on this path. And even if they didn’t, how was she supposed to stop the acid from devouring what was inside the Red Box after it had dissolved the Autolian?

Dissolve...that was it. The key was not to attack directly the Alchemical resistance. It could last a long, long time, but Autolian was not a Philosopher’s Stone. Like everything else, it was going to succumb to the ravages of time.

Alexandra didn’t need a Super-Acid. She ‘just’ needed an Ageing Potion effective against non-living things.

Fortunately, she had learned the instructions to achieve it after discussing the potential of this particular substance for pranks with the Twin Terrors. That was good news. The bad news, of course, was the fact she had never brewed it before. Moreover, the Ageing Potion for living beings was a Fourth Year-Potion. Its non-living variant was more difficult, not less. And it had a preparation’s length of...over three hours.

Alexandra grimaced and then sighed as she saw the large representation of an hourglass announce she had used three minutes out of the total time. This was the only potential solution she had with her limited repertoire of Potions. Something to remedy for the European Magical Tournament assuredly, but it would have to do. And if it worked, brewing an OWL-level Potion would give her plenty of points.

What was the worst that could happen? The Ageing Potion wasn’t illegal in any form, and at worst if she failed, well it wasn’t a humiliation to be unable to prepare something they had never been taught in class.

“What in the name of Merlin do you think you’re doing, Mr. Weasley?” The referee who had been overseeing the red-head Gryffindor stormed forwards on her right and cast a powerful over a cauldron which was already smoking a very disgusting torrent of black smoke. “Have you ever heard about proper handling measures when Doxy eggs are involved? And you didn’t even properly boil the water beforehand! Please go to the room outside the Great Hall reserved to the Champions until the preliminary is over.”

“I can continue!”

“I won’t allow you to waste more ingredients for frivolous purposes!” the brown-bearded Potion Master exclaimed. “Zero and you’d better change your brewing methods if you want to have a chance at an ‘A’ when you will pass your OWLs.”

Alexandra wasn’t a saint, and so she couldn’t prevent a large smile from coming on her face as a tomato-faced ‘Marauder’ was forced to walk away. Seriously, looking at the list of ingredients deployed on the worktable, what had he tried to brew? Doxy eggs and porcupine quills were never added close to another unless you wanted an explosion...

BOOM!

Speaking of explosions, Seamus Finnigan had apparently exploded his cauldron. It had to be a record, even for him. She didn’t even know how you could in three minutes arrive to something incredibly explosive by mistake. Even throwing two acids in close succession with a reactive substance was not guaranteed to explode...

Alexandra shook her head. It wasn’t important. It was best to focus on her own Potion, no matter how satisfying it was to know she couldn’t do worse than the abysmal disaster of Ronald Weasley.

“Okay...so the Ageing Potions. Newt spleens, five doses, rose roots, porcupine quills, saffron...” the list was long, but fortunately the magically-extended parchment had hundreds of the most common ingredients. She would have to be careful with the Chronos Viper’s skin, though. There was only one, and it was a small one. Worse, it was one of the three basic ingredients the rest of the preparation depended upon. The second was newt spleens, but she had two kilograms of them. And the third...

“The third are bananas.”

She was sure she heard plenty of spectators laugh when the first fruit was summoned on her table.

The next hours were nightmarish. Brewing something like the Ageing Potion had certainly a lot of short-cuts a competent Potions expert would be able to recognise after trying it twice or thrice. But Alexandra was not an expert, and so she could only follow the memorised step and hope she had learned the correct quantities and not forgotten an ingredient or a critical step. She did not raise her head anymore as more and more explosions were heard.

The water was boiled, a banana without spleen was thrown every ten minutes, one porcupine quill per hour to add potency, the newt spleens added after several Engorgement Charms and the rose roots were macerated in a cup of oak sap which had received a Firecrab jewel. The Chronos’ Viper was the worst to prepare. Part of the scales had to be cut, the spices and plants carefully inserted inside the heavy skin and then the scales had to be reattached in the correct place.

And of course there was the magic. First-year or second-year Potions could in theory be made without pouring your magic in it, as long as you were at Hogwarts. But this one needed magical help from the brewer to be stable. Twice the surface liquid had turned red and violent, and she had to ‘calm’ it until it returned to a placid orange.

“My Potion was not going to explode!” the voice of Leo Black arrived to her ears.

“Your Potion was supposed to be yellow at this stage, idiot boy!” barked one of the referees. “Yellow! Are you dumb or did you just try to copy the girl next to you without understanding a single step?”

“I will try again!” the Gryffindor menace promised mutinously.

“Maybe you will, boy, but not in my presence. You didn’t do any security checks. You didn’t use the elementary rules of hygiene. You tried shamelessly to copy the work of someone, and you did it in a way which proved you understood nothing. If you continue like this, the only grade you will receive in a Potion OWLs is a ‘T’. Now clean your worktable and go in the room next to the Hall with the other failures. You have proved today you will never be a Potion Master.”

Alexandra continued to brew, though she authorised herself a smile before macerating different types of roots.

The hourglass had barely fifteen minutes left when her Potion began to take a sickly yellow-green colour which was far too dark to be good. By this point, the Ageing brewage should be a blue-green if she remembered correctly.

And on her table, there was only a last vial of peppermint and a last banana, which were more for dissipating the last impurities than any super-miraculous alteration. Damn it...so close...and yet so far.

What step did she miss? There had to be something...

“You imbued too much of your magic in your Potion, Miss Potter,” Alexandra raised her head in time to see the referee place her Potion in temporary stasis again. “Ageing Potions demand a very light touch from the beginning.”

“I understand,” she would have to work too on her magical control, apparently. Assimilating the hydra’s heads was boosting her core, but it wasn’t always good. “The other steps?”

“You failed to use twice the proper instruments to correctly merge the different ingredient cores, but overwhelming the water with your magic automatically corrected this issue.”

Okay, it made her feel a little better. It wasn’t like she could truly have completed the Potion anyway.

“Would it have worked, in your opinion?”

When it came to it, her attempt at the Ageing Potion was a gamble. It wasn’t like she had tested it against Autolian protections before...

“Oh yes,” it was not the black-haired referee which answered, but Horas Slughorn. The big-bellied man looked tremendously happy, caressing his moustache. “It would have worked. Assuming you emptied the entire cauldron on the Red Box, of course. Ageing Potions at this level of potency must be used in great quantities to break Alchemic resistance.”

The bald Potion Master’s eyes analysed the Potion for a few seconds, and his expression convinced her that for all his cheerful and genial personality, Horace Slughorn was a Potion Master through and through.

“A valiant effort for your first try, Miss Potter,” Alexandra could not help but feel very pleased; the tone was full of approval. “It was your first try, yes?”

“It was,” she confirmed. “We have never worked with Chronos Viper’s skin before, nor were the steps 6, 7 and 8 explained in class.”

“Yes, those are quite tricky, don’t they?” the old Potions Master caressed his moustache again. “The Ageing Potion is one of the five or six Potions I always presented as the ‘Art’ of the Potions. Following instructions by heart is not enough; being magically powerful isn’t enough; skill, training and experimentations are your best resources to brew a Potion of this difficulty.”

Horace Slughorn took a vial in one of his pockets and filled it with her potion in a twirl of his wand.

“Yes, the magical potency imbued in it was too strong,” the former Head of Slytherin declared as some spells directed at the vial divided the liquid in a yellow substance and the blue-green Potion she should have achieved at the end. “But as I said, a good attempt for a Potion you only knew the instructions of and is two years above your year-level. I think you could have received an A at your OWLs...”

“You are always too generous,” the referee next to him pointed out. “And Miss Potter was the daughter of your favourite student...”

Alexandra hid her surprise behind a mask of politeness. Truly? Flitwick had hinted her mother was good in Potions while she was at Hogwarts, but since there had been no one to confirm she had ignored it for the last years. It wasn’t like the Potions Professors at Hogwarts were the conversational type...

“John! John! Could you remind me how did your first attempt to brew a fifth-year Potion ended? My memory was a bit foggy from all these blue fumes...”

As her attempt to brew something was clearly over, and the two Potion Masters spoke of a lot of things which were not her business, Alexandra finally watched her surroundings and realised she was one of the last participants to be at her worktable.

Hermione was still there, surrounded by three judges, but judging by her expression of defeat, her friend had not been more successful than she was. More than ten cauldrons away, Cedric Diggory was brewing something. The green-eyed girl had no idea what it was, but it was not promising. Cauldrons were rarely supposed to erupt in a viscous violet substance every five seconds.

This was all. Whatever had happened in the last three hours – apart from Leo Black and Ronald Weasley be thrown out due to their pathetic brewing skills – everyone had finished well before them.

“If you are in need of a Potion tutor for the upcoming Tournament, my door is open, Miss Potter,” Slughorn affirmed, the referee next to him doing his best to not look tired and unsurprised.

“Thank you Professor,” she answered politely. The former Hogwarts Professor looked like he was a Slytherin of the ancient mould. And House Slughorn was definitely an important force among the Grey Houses. Alexandra wasn’t going to make an enemy out of the man. “I will consider it.”

The failed Ageing Potion was banished from the cauldron and the referee cleaned up in two spells the remnants of her work. And then the countdown went to zero, the sand of the great hourglass symbolically running out.

The referees next to Hermione had already departed to debate with the judges. Cedric Diggory, on the other hand, was stopped by another judge and two referees, though it looked like it had been a lost cause anyway.

“The Slytherins cheated,” were the first words Hermione told her as the ward-barriers came down and the rest of the students were summoned back to the Great Hall.

Alexandra frowned. How did they...no, wrong question. Snape or Whitehead had told them beforehand.

“I was a bit too busy with my Potion to look out for them, but assuming our dear Potions Professors told them,” the Ravenclaw teenager lowered her voice to make sure their conversation wasn’t heard by everyone. “What did they try to brew?”

“It was a sort of blue paste. I think it’s a Wyrd Benediction...” the rest was muttered at an impressive speed. “I tried a Moros Draught, but I missed two steps in the third phase...”

“Hermione, the Moros Draught is a NEWT-level Potion,” and some in the corridors said she was an overachiever...

“You can talk; your augmented Ageing Potion wasn’t exactly a first-year exercise either.”

Their exchange had to be postponed as all the Hufflepuffs, Gryffindors, Slytherins and Ravenclaws were summoned back in front of the judges. At least it wasn’t hard to know who had been told of the preliminary beforehand. Graham Montague, Cassius Warrington and Theodore Nott all walked and swaggered like they had won a race in the Olympic Games. Blaise and Tracey, however, sent murderous looks at the older Snakes. They, at least, hadn’t been told. And judging by the dejected looks of the four others, they had been told but had failed to brew correctly their Wyrd Benediction.

The ten judges did not look pleased or happy as they waited their verdict. Dumbledore was no exception. Well, Bagman was still smiling, but he was a moron.

One of the judges stood up, if she wasn’t mistaken it was Gerard Curzon, and the blonde-haired wizard did not start with compliments.

“I wish I could say it was a day your Potions Professors could be proud of, but I am not in the habit to speak lies. This preliminary was an insult to the noble art of Potion-making. Out of sixty-six students, thirty-five failed utterly to follow basic security procedures. If I had my way, these wizard and witches would return with the first-years for the rest of the year to learn the basics. It’s obvious they have learned nothing about brewing, and their behaviour under a stressful situation is a guarantee of failure.”

The judge sat down and a tall brown-haired judge rose up.

“Given the time you had at your disposal and the impressive list of ingredients available to help you in your brewing, this preliminary was judged like it was a Potion OWL-exam. Your scores are behind you.”

Alexandra turned like everyone else, and sure enough in flaming letters the score were there. And for the first time, she hadn’t won the preliminary.

*Cassius Warrington – 55 points*

*Theodore Nott – 53 points*

*Graham Montague – 51 points*

This was...was she supposed to laugh or cry? The three Slytherins had known what the task was about and how to win it handily. And they had barely managed an average grade? Some people had to be really, really worried. If you couldn’t crush the competition when the whole thing was rigged, this wasn’t a good sign for an ‘impartial’ competition in a foreign school.

Fortunately, apart from these idiots, she was still at the top of the rankings.

*Hermione Granger - 46 points*

*Alexandra Potter – 40 points*

Assuming eight judges had given her a five...oh who was she kidding, Dumbledore had more likely given her a zero.

The rest of the ranking’s list was just...depressing.

*Cedric Diggory – 39 points*

*Fred Weasley – 38 points*

*George Weasley – 38 points*

*Roger Davies – 21 points*

*Kenneth Towler – 14 points*

*Geoffrey Hooper – 12 points*

*Cho Chang – 10 points*

*Lucian Bole – 6 points*

*Peregrine Derrick – 4 points*

*Neville Longbottom – 3 points*

*Malcolm Preece – 2 points*

*Morag MacDougal – 1 point*

The rest? It was a long list of zeros. The judges had not been joking when they had told they had tested them like it was the OWLs. Obviously, the OWLs were asking a student to brew something you had studied in the first five years of Hogwarts election, but it was hardly a good sign more than half of the champions had been ‘rewarded’ with a zero.

“One more preliminary and this farce will be over...” Hermione grumbled. Was she that much of a bad influence over the former Gryffindor?

**6 March 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Tomorrow was not going to be a good day.

Albus wondered how the ‘bad days’ had gone from ‘I have to correct one of Fudge’s mistakes’ to ‘all I have built is at risk’. Oh, he was able to follow the avalanche of mistakes and events which had led to it, but the celerity and the catastrophes all leading to it had all happened in the last couple of years...even counting his enemies playing against him in the shadows, it was depressingly astonishing.

 The Chief Warlock caressed his silver beard before returning behind his desk. Yes, mistakes had been made. Some were his, others had come from his subordinates and he had given his assent with a murmur or a nod.

The disaster of yesterday during the third preliminary was Severus’, but good luck convincing the Potion Masters Crouch and Bagman had invited of that!

And yes, it was the two Department Heads of the Ministry who had invited these cauldron-lovers. What were the ex-Beater and the former DMLE Head thinking? Seven judges, the majority of them Light and one or two Grey? They were guaranteed to receive a hundred critics from the Wizengamot Lord and Ladies next session!

Albus had tried very hard to limit the number of judges to one or two aside from the permanent trio including Crouch, Bagman and himself. He had also chosen foreigners, men and women who were not directly tied to him. Bagman’s decisions had completely upturned that, and to make things worse, five of the Potion Masters were some of the most extreme elements the Light in Britain had to offer. It would have been difficult to make things worse, but the indebted wizard had achieved it by inviting Slughorn. Slughorn. It was common knowledge the former Slytherin had used his influence to cut him access to certain of his students after he had fired him, and the two of them had not met since 1985. And Crouch had not said a word when the ex-Quidditch player invited him to Hogwarts!

Sometimes, Albus wondered if refusing the Minister’s office had really been a solution of facility.

It was hard to see how he could have placed someone more incompetent than Ludovic Bagman as a Department Head. Then again, given how certain of his choices had turned out...

In hindsight, the third preliminary’s organisation should never have fallen in the hands of his two Potion Professors. When he had told them he would use some of his Alchemy hours to create the Red Boxes, Albus had naively thought they were going to make something similar to the Forbidden Corridor: enigmas and riddles or maybe a small treasure hunt to discover the ingredient list and the instructions to brew a fourth-year Potion. Never had he dreamt that his Head of Slytherin and his subordinate would be so arrogant to present the boxes like they were part of a mystery exhibition and let the students survive or fall alone.

Predictably, the champions had fallen. The Hogwarts Headmaster hadn’t even bothered to hide his disgust yesterday evening when he had summoned Severus. What did he thought this preliminary was going to achieve? Students from the four Houses had classes to attend to, homework to return, and other games and sports to play. They were not going to spend hundreds of hours in the library searching for the most esoteric substances invented by Potion Masters and Mistresses! Assuming the contrary was completely idiotic! And evidently it had not been enough, because the Slytherin duo had decided to inform some of their snakes and leave the rest of the participants in the dark!

Five students of the same House had attempted to brew the same Potion with exactly the same methods and timing. If someone was ready to believe it was a coincidence, Albus had some lands at the bottom of the Channel to sell them...

“I suppose the reforms next September won’t be as unwelcome as I thought...” It had been decided that the duties of Head of Gryffindor would be taken by someone who was not a Professor next year, as the incidents of last Halloween had placed Minerva in difficulty. But now in hindsight, the rot had to be cut somewhere and he didn’t trust Severus like he had trusted him at the beginning of 1992. House Slytherin forged too many supporters of Tom Riddle despite the ‘vigilance’ of his Potion Master and inter-Houses quarrels were going to be more violent than ever after this pathetic preliminary.

“What a disaster.”

There were many things that could be said about Potion Masters, but one thing which never came out was enjoying ignorant practitioners trample their ‘art’ with dirty shoes. And that was exactly what Severus had presented to them with this preliminary. Two-thirds of the Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs had been thrown out of the room in the first fifteen minutes, failing the most basic procedures and security checks. The other third and most of the Slytherins and Ravenclaws had been forced to rely on improvisation in conditions they had never been prepared to handle. No one had been able to open the Red Boxes...well, no one save a trio of Slytherin boys, but given that Severus had made them brew the Potion the day before, the Headmaster thought he could be forgiven to doubt their skill and moral character.

This was absolutely calamitous. If there was a trial similar to this one in the European Magical Tournament, Hogwarts was going to receive the greatest humiliation of its long history. It would be worse in loss of prestige than the incident which had seen four centuries ago a Beauxbatons Champion return to France with the pregnant Headmaster’s daughter.

“Maybe I should stop everything now. Maybe...” Contrary to what the infernal gossip-journalists of the *Daily Prophet* and the *Loud Duck* thought, it had not escaped him his authority and powerbase were under attack.

The problem was how to answer these challenges.

The Defeater of Grindelwald grabbed a few parchments out of the pile of paperwork and read them again. The numbers and the grim predictions, unfortunately, had not changed since last time.

The conclusions of the accountants of the Order of the Phoenix were short, clear, and unpleasant to hear. If Hogwarts withdrew from the inter-school competition, the penalties alone they would have to pay the Scuola Regina would place his school near bankruptcy. Politics and prestige being what they were, the aftershocks would certainly destroy the school or at least cripple it for more than a decade.

Technically, he could mitigate some of the monetary effects by selling more Alchemical goods. In practise, the Board of Governors was more and more inquisitive, and he doubted this transfer of funds from his treasury to Hogwarts would not be remarked, no matter how pure his intentions.

But this was only the gold loss. He wouldn’t be able to compensate the sheer loss of prestige, influence, and likely the dozens of students leaving Hogwarts to find education and pride elsewhere.

No, the preliminaries couldn’t be stopped right now. He had no grounds to withdraw Hogwarts’ participation...and he feared he wasn’t going to be granted one.

Maybe he could mitigate the damage by asking for a few favours to certain Potion Masters. Not immediately, but once the students participating in the Tournament were decided, he could negotiate advanced tutoring for the champions supporting his ideals and give a few passes to Grey families he needed the votes of...

He felt more than he heard the indication someone had uttered the correct password to the gargoyle protecting his office, and this made Albus pile up the parchments in a more professional pile and he tried to hide exhaustion and doubts away from his expression.

“Come in, Sirius,” the Chief Warlock said before the younger wizard had the time to knock. A meagre pleasure he authorised himself, and certainly the last one for a while.

Because none of the problems he had quoted previously were the reason tomorrow was going to be a bad day.

“Albus! My cousin is accusing me to have played a part in the sealing of Cassiopeia Black’s will!”

Sometimes the old wizard wished he had not encouraged everyone to see him as a beloved figure. The urge to retort something sarcastic like ‘you were extremely enthusiastic about it if I recall’ was not far from his lips.

Instead, he simply nodded silently.

“You have to stop her!”

“I can’t,” admitting he was powerless did not come easily, but in this affair there was no use pretending he could solve everything with a spell cast from the Elder Wand. “As I informed you two days ago, I am under investigation along with Minister Fudge for the same accusations Narcissa Malfoy brought against you.”

It made him extremely wary of this entire situation, to be honest. Lucius Malfoy’s schemes were fairly transparent and easy to untangle, but his wife was less reliant on stupid excuses and brutality, and more adept to use the vicious political cunning House Black had been infamously known for several centuries.

“I should never have followed your suggestion,” the old politician looked at Sirius with a very disappointed stare. Assuming he was not suffering from a crisis of senility and amnesia, it was the Lord Black in front of him who had asked him first to seal the Mistress of the Black Files’ will away, not the contrary. He also noticed the rather dishevelled appearance of his interlocutor and the smell of Firewhiskey which had recently appeared in his office. “I should have dealt with her on my own...”

Albus did not speak a word, but privately he doubted Sirius Black could have ‘dealt’ with Cassiopeia somehow. Not because the Dark Witch would have been difficult to defeat magically. On death’s door like the aged Black was, an eleven years-old child could have beaten her. Politically, it was an entirely different story.

“I won’t allow her to blackmail me from beyond the grave!”

At moments like this, Albus wondered what sort of dirty secrets the Dark Witch had accumulated on Sirius Black. The Lord Black had never been shy about sharing his triumphs and trysts, and most of what he had done during his childhood was common knowledge in plenty of circles.

“Surely you have a secondary strategy, Albus.”

“My secondary strategy, if you recall correctly our discussions Sirius, was to ensure the prompt downfall of House Malfoy several months ago. It was my opinion the status of Cassiopeia’s will would not matter the moment the Malfoy block disintegrated with several of its leaders sent to Azkaban.” Between bigoted laws, possession of Dark Artefacts, a very shady past with plenty of Imperius excuses and their financial support of Voldemort’s terror campaign, House Malfoy would have been limited to one arrogant teenage boy and the matter would have been allowed to die in the dusty library-archives of the Ministry for a few decades.

But in the downfall of the Heir of Slytherin, he had not been able to prove House Malfoy’s was associated with the Basilisk attacks and the ‘Junior Death Eaters’. The young Malfoy had not been involved, and the high number of killings had prevented Legilimency probes.

“This...is not going to work.”

Albus closed his eyes. What a glorious understatement.

“No,” the Chief Warlock said with a hint of humour in his words. “It won’t. So my next strategy is simple. Stall. Stall at every turn, stall for every step of the procedures, delay DMLE investigations, use Fudge to remove most of the evidence, and stall again.”

Against a modest opponent, it would perhaps work, though the sealing of the will would have been broken eventually. Against House Malfoy? He could only try to delay the unavoidable. Narcissa Malfoy née Black had the law support to continue a judicial fight for decades.

“This is not a cheap strategy,” the dishevelled Lord Black remarked.

“It will be cheaper compared to the fines she has no doubt the intention to force us to pay,” the Headmaster of Hogwarts spoke humourlessly.

**7 March 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Hogwarts had a lot of empty classrooms no one used, so Alexandra wasn’t going to mock someone from profiting from the opportunity to use them for an academic project or preparing a long-term project. It would have been very hypocritical, since the room the Exiled used when they gathered together was one. Moreover, she had decided to finance the Weasley Twins and those two troublemakers were likely the biggest users of abandoned classrooms across the castle.

So no, trying to find an abandoned classroom and converting it for your purposes didn’t necessarily scream of bad intentions, especially as unlike Ravenclaw, the three other Head of Houses didn’t regularly provide individual bedrooms to students.

But as much as the Gryffindor room was a realm of disorder, deciding to install one’s study room in a deserted classroom on the eighth floor, a level which was just below the Astronomy Tower and the two elevated Common Rooms, and never frequented by anyone...it was isolation at its finest.

Proof of it, the door wasn’t even closed. The Potter Heiress knocked nonetheless, for politeness’ sake if nothing else.

“Enter!”

The first thing that came to her mind when she discovered the full disposition of the room was ‘wow, that’s a lot of books and parchments’, only to amend her thought a second later. There were a lot of parchment rolls, essays, notes and homework-related papers, but the books weren’t that numerous. It was just that they were particularly huge. The covers alone would make for nice pillow in Binns and Tiroflan classes.

“Potter? What are you doing here? How did you find me? Are you not supposed to be in your Common Room?” The succession of questions from the mouth of Percival ‘Percy’ Weasley, Head Boy and extraordinary Humongous Big Head of House Gryffindor – the latter according to Fred and George – were quick and left no overture.

“In the order you asked them: to see you of course, I asked the Twins and no, curfew is in one hour.”

The duration between her answers and the unavoidable next question took her the opportunity to observe the red-haired boy. As always, the old teenager’s appearance was meticulous and perfect, except maybe the ink on one’s hand, but given the sum of writings next to him, this was excusable.

The questions were a bit worrying, to be honest. Someone’s location was never a secret in the corridors of Hogwarts, and his priorities where curfew was mentioned...

“I suppose you have a message from Fred and George. Give it to me, I have an analysis on the Fifth Law of...”

“You misunderstand. Fred and George didn’t give me a message. I am here of my own will. And my message is...what the hell do you think you are doing?”

“I am preparing for my NEWTs,” replied haughtily the Head Boy, with a tone which had made the elder Weasley present at Hogwarts incredibly unpopular. “I have to achieve the top score to enter the Ministry of Magic you know. Some of us can’t buy our way into the good graces of famed Masters...”

Alexandra suddenly wanted to beat the brother of Ronald Weasley with her bare hands. Seriously, when did the Twin Terrors become the less problematic brothers of this family?

“You know nothing of me, Percival Weasley. If you did, you would never have insinuated I am ready to spend gold to buy my way into the Ministry.”

Being a Hydra Animagus, she was far more enthusiast at the idea of slaughtering the idiots and pushing for her guardian to form a new government. Sure, Lady Zabini would like make some new laws about fashion and shopping, but at some point you had to make some sacrifices for a revolution to succeed.

The Basilisk-Slayer left him five seconds to apologise. As they didn’t come, in fact her interlocutor was re-reading something which looked like a corrected homework of Transfiguration, Alexandra decided the time for semi-courtesy was over.

“I am here to tell you that breaking up with Penelope like you did...it was rude and heartbreaking.”

“My love life isn’t any concern of yours,” Percival told her frostily.

“No? Then what about your astounding level of popularity?”

“What do you mean?” the older brother of Fred and George asked with a confused expression. “I am the Head Boy, I am...”

“At this very moment, you are the third least popular person at Hogwarts, and the first two are our Potion Masters.” After the Potion preliminary, there truly was no contest where Snape and Whitehead were concerned. “Slytherins would have already loathed your guts because you are a Gryffindor, but your pompous ambition has irritated even the most tolerant Snakes. The Hufflepuffs don’t like anyone who is so individualistic and willing to break ties with someone for academic goals. The Ravenclaws...”

“Get out of here,” the Gryffindor interrupted her. “I know what I am doing, and I don’t need a lesson of ethics from a girl which has a killing count in the double digits.”

Alexandra shrugged. Well, she had promised to try.

“Gladly,” she retorted, “in three years, don’t come complaining when you will be alone and your ambition will have ruined every relationship you might have had.”

This was sad, really. Unlike her, Percy had really plenty of opportunities to have friends before Hogwarts and they had not dried up at school. But he was willing to sacrifice most of what he had gained for a job where the majority would consider him a Blood-Traitor. What was the point?

“Get out!”

**Author’s note**: There are certain things Alexandra was able to change from canon. Percy’s ambition...was not one of them.

And yes, first preliminary where Alexandra didn’t win...of course, the odds were really, really stacked against her and everyone who wasn’t informed by the Potions Professors of what they were supposed to brew beforehand.

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