**Chapter 67**

**Sports and Quill**

**10 January 1994, the Black Lake, Scotland**

It was not a thought which often came to her.

But in moments like these, Tracey wondered how Slytherin had fallen so low.

Merlin’s beard, they were the House of Salazar Slytherin. Their very Sorting was supposed to be the proof they stood for ambition and cunning in their world. From the dungeons the next generation of politicians, lawyers, healers, Potion masters, and other prestigious jobs were recruited.

Before Dumbledore’s academic time at Hogwarts, House Slytherin had held most of the OWLs and NEWTs records, and even then, many had been beaten by more recent alumni in the 40s and the 50s.

They were Slytherins. They used talent, skill, and intelligence to rise to the top. Or at least they were supposed to.

Tracey was well-aware she was not the best student who had ever graced the House of Snakes. And if Daphne was not her best friend, it would have probably been worse for her during the first months after her Sorting.

But compared to the students lining up with her for the preliminaries, there was no doubt the standards had been slipping, and they had been slipping very badly.

On her direct left, there was Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. They were third-years like her, and they were dumb as rocks. When first year had started, some had thought the two were trying to pass as dumb brutes in a cunning tactic to make everyone underestimate them. Unfortunately, this was not a tactic. Crabbe and Goyle were huge, tall, and the topics they valued above all were food and how to obtain more of it. If there was a drop of ambition in their heads, it had to be food-related. To say they were disgraces to the name of Slytherin was underestimating their lack of magical prowess. And it was extremely fortunate for them Hogwarts was never asking students who had abysmal grades to leave until the OWLs and a repeat of the fifth year.

Seriously, Tracey had no idea how those two had managed to get into Slytherin. It might be the most cunning thing they would ever do in their lives: convince a thousand-year-old hat to send them where they didn’t belong.

And if only they were the only boys blemishing the name of Slytherin. To their immediate left, Theodore Nott was standing; Crabbe and Goyle’s new leader now that Draco Malfoy had lost what little influence he had left and stopped caring about the two mountains of muscle. On the plus side, the Nott Heir was smarter than the only child of Lord Malfoy. Not that it represented a particular achievement: Draco Malfoy had behaved for two years like he was a loud-mouthed Gryffindor, threatening and blustering with promises every wrong or insult would go back to his father. Nott was slightly better than him on this...unfortunately, he was also far more vicious and cruel. Many ‘incidents’ in Potions could be laid at his feet, and they were in general far from benign. Daphne had advised her from the first day to stay out of the way of Nott, and she had followed that suggestion. There was a sense of...darkness and sickness which came from Theodore. It was like when you were next to a carnivorous animal which could go on a killing spree at any moment.

The other Slytherin students were much older but not untouched by stupidity. Lucian Bole and Peregrine Derrick were slightly upgraded versions of Crabbe and Goyle. They were already infamous throughout the castle for their catastrophic grades in any class requiring a bit of smartness and being the Beaters of the Slytherin Quidditch Team.

One might have believed this was the lowest one could fall, but there was Cassius Warrington and Graham Montague at the extreme left of the line. The two had been involved in the fiasco of the Chamber of Secrets and incidentally violated one of the unofficial cardinal rules of House Slytherin: don’t get caught.

Honestly, Tracey was surprised to see the Headmaster had accepted their candidatures. Either Dumbledore was getting senile or he had figured forbidding some Slytherins to participate in the trials would eliminate several Gryffindors from the preliminaries too – the Lions were not known for being academic overachievers.

“What a magnificent spectacle we must present to the other Houses!” she said cheerfully to Blaise, who was standing on her right.

“Be careful,” the dark-skinned boy replied with no smile whatsoever. “There are far more Lions and Badgers today than there were yesterday.”

Tracey shrugged.

“It was unavoidable, I suppose. The weather is far better today, and after the ruckus Potter made last morning, I suppose everyone is suddenly more interested in the selection of the other three Champions.”

Save a few brain-dead people, most students of Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and Slytherin had known who was going to be the Ravenclaw Champion. But yesterday... it had showed in a blunt and decisive manner the difference of power and skill between the most powerful third-year of Hogwarts and the rest of the competition.

 And there had been a new official record on the distance you could Summon something without exhausting yourself for several hours.

“Good point. But anything illegal is completely out of the question,” the son of the Black Widow affirmed with his usual bored look on his face. “We haven’t the difficult weather conditions the Ravenclaw had yesterday.”

Tracey nodded in approval. Yesterday there had been much wind and snow, but today a timid sun was warming the Scottish hills and the shores of the Black Lake. There was even a tiny patch of blue sky in the south.

“Watch out. I think Warrington is trying to curse us before the trial begins.”

This gave Tracey the urge to chuckle. How predictable many Slytherins had become.

Ludovic ‘call me Ludo’ Bagman continued to shout some nonsense, but she and Blaise didn’t listen to his jokes and his ‘encouragements’. Their attention was fixed towards their feet, where large and dark wood roots were trying to immobilise them.

Tracey wasn’t impressed. This was the Curse of the Wood and Roots, and despite its name of ‘Curse’, the incantation was extremely simple and she herself had learned it during October of her second year. It didn’t require more power than an advanced second-year spell and was generally considered useless, because the moment your target moved, the roots had no chance to entrap the target. And to make it even less useful, the simplest of flame spells were able to burn the roots.

Yes, it was a good situation to use it because they were waiting for the end of Bagman’s ‘motivation speech’, but really, the Curse of the Wood and Roots...

If those two managed to catch up with school homework and Professor Snape judged them ready, they would pass their OWLs in May – the suspension they got for following the Heir of Slytherin had played havoc on their already not-impressive academic performances. Tracey had not expected Dark Arts, not with Dumbledore fifty feet away, but surely they had something more cunning and subtle in their libraries?

Keeping her cheerful smile, Tracey whispered a low Incendio and removed the more threatening roots. She wasn’t the only one. Save Crabbe and Goyle’s feet who were now almost invisible in the dozens of roots, everyone else had taken the appropriate counter-measure.

“3...2...1...IT BEGINS!”

Crabbe and Goyle, forgetting the most elementary prudence, were the first to run in the direction of the flags planted atop the frozen surface of the Black Lake.

They were also the first to fall, as three Stupefy spells hit Crabbe in the back, and four put Goyle unconscious.

“They were ready to turn their backs to us?” Blaise asked with a rare expression of astonishment on his face. “These idiots should have been sorted into Hufflepuff, they are far too trusting...”

Glad to hear Daphne and she weren’t the only two to have doubts where the skills of the Sorting Hat were debated.

“Let’s see the positive side, we have removed two players from our preliminaries...not that Crabbe and Goyle worried me, of course.”

Warrington and Montague threw a barrage of third-year spells at them a second later, forcing them to evade and go on the defensive. The older Slytherin students profited from their advantage and began to run in direction of the flags.

“A good thing Pucey insisted we mustn’t win this trial...”

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Save Hufflepuff, none of the Hogwarts Houses were particularly famous for their undying loyalty. Today was going to provide a textbook example why Slytherin was a nest of vipers waiting only for an opportunity to strike at each other.

“Unless Tracey or Blaise wins their House’s preliminaries, I think it will be best not to count on the Slytherin Champion.”

Alexandra said as they watched the farce unravel on the Black Lake. There was no other accurate sentence to describe the lamentable spectacle offered by the ‘Champions’ of House Slytherin. Truthfully, if there’d been fewer spectators, the green-eyed girl would have placed her head between her hands and sobbed.

The Potter Heiress had not expected much from the Slytherin selections once the roster had been known, but even her lowest expectations had clearly been too high.

“You were counting on Crabbe and Goyle to prove themselves as geniuses?” Morag wondered. “I didn’t think you were an optimist to this degree.”

Alexandra giggled. The two thugs who had served Draco Malfoy and were now following Theodore Nott were still lying unconscious where the seven other Slytherins had incapacitated them.

“No, I wasn’t counting on our favourite bottom-ranked thugs,” she admitted. “On the other hand, I was counting on Warrington and the older students to know a fair bit of advanced magic in Transfiguration, Charms and other disciplines. I didn’t expect them to stick with third and fourth-year Transfiguration and Charms. It’s pathetic.”

Under the eyes of the Exiled and several dozen other students, the Slytherins had tried to transfigure a lot of wood and ice into skis, sledges, or various animals to help them go faster on the ice.

It was hardly what she would call impressive...maybe her standards were just too high? But the four judges waiting on their seats weren’t giving the participants awe-filled glances.

And, Alexandra reminded herself, the Slytherins had the same instructions and challenge they had yesterday. In other words, Montague and his ilk were doing far worse than Alexandra, Morag, Cho, and Roger...and they had twenty-four more hours to prepare knowing exactly what they had to face. Somehow, the raven-haired witch doubted this unfair privilege would be given in the real Tournament.

“Oh look, Montague has managed to seize his flag this time,” Hermione informed them with the modified magical binoculars stuck to her eyes.

“I suppose the Rune puzzles protecting the flags haven’t an unlimited amount of punishment to deliver.” Because it was obvious Montague hadn’t taken Runes or bothered understanding a single thing about this academic discipline. Seeing him propelled away, electro-shocked and forced to inhale quantities of smoke had been very funny.

“He’s far from the finish line. Derrick and Bole have seen him. They intend to stop him.”

Indeed, the two Beaters of the Slytherin Quidditch team charged towards Montague, or rather it would be more accurate to say they slide on the ice on hastily transfigured magical surfboards. Judging by their precipitation, their own efforts to discover how to unlock their flags had been less than successful.

And as hexes and jinxes flew over the air, one thing became a certainty.

“They are going to crash...” Nigel commented.

“I don’t want to see that, their nargles are under the ice,” Luna added.

Bole managed to evade the collision in a desperate tight turn which sent him far away from his fellow Slytherins. It wasn’t an atrocious decision, because when Derrick rammed into Montague at full speed, everyone in the audience, Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs included, winced.

“FOUL!” exclaimed Bagman for the thirtieth time this morning. Unlike the Slytherins, the ex-Beater of the Wimbourne Wasps had the time of his life commenting this...this preliminary. To be fair, the Slytherins were practising such dirty methods of playing – no doubt directly inspired from their Quidditch games – “FOUL OF MR. DERRICK ON MR. MONTAGUE! THERE WILL BE POINT PENALTIES FOR THIS ATTACK!”

“The Slytherin Champion will have practised against real opposition...” Morag told her.

“You call Derrick and Bole real opposition? My, my, Morag you are an optimist at heart...”

“AND MR. WARRINGTON AND MR. NOTT HAVE BOTH THEIR FLAGS! THE RACE FOR THE FINISH LINE CAN BEGIN!”

This outburst would maybe enflame a crowd in the short-term future, but not here and not now. Because whatever Bagman pretended, Warrington had a large advance and despite his ridiculous attempt copying Cho Chang’s ice-skating techniques, he finished first without contestation.

“MR. WARRINGTON WINS THE FIRST PRELIMINARY OF HOUSE SLYTHERIN IN ONE HOUR AND FORTY MINUTES!”

There weren’t many people cheering for the victory of the junior Death Eater, and Alexandra was not one of them. Really, none of the Gryffindors cheered. A few Hufflepuffs did, maybe for the sake of the formality. The main source of applause came, not surprisingly, from House Slytherin.

Nott finished second of the preliminary three minutes later. Bole got the third place.

In fourth and fifth position were two Slytherins who could have definitely done better, and they didn’t even try to disguise it. Blaise Zabini and Tracey Davis made a mock sprint to amuse the spectators and the judges, and they finished in a ‘perfect time’ of two hours and two hours and one second.

There must have been Slytherin politics at play there. The duo had been confident they could win their trial without problem yesterday, for them to participate like it was a big chore...

Sixth was Graham Montague. Peregrine Derrick came seventh. And of course...

“MR. CRABBE AND MR. GOYLE HAVE BEEN REENERVATED WITH THE JUDGES’ HELP AND WILL NOT BE ABLE TO COMPLETE THIS TRIAL!”

Alexandra sighed in relief, like the rest of the Hogwarts’ students. This preliminary had been long and as fun as it had been to laugh at certain Slytherins she didn’t like, there had been a lot of boredom.

“AND NOW WE HAVE THE JUDGES’ GRADES!”

“Oh this is going to be so fun...” Morag snickered and dozens of predatory smiles were on the students’ faces.

And it was. Crabbe and Goyle were ex-aequo in eighth place with a single point. The organisers took into account they had tried to participate, even if their ‘performance’ had lasted less than five seconds. Peregrine Derrick gained ten points. Graham Montague achieved thirty. Blaise Zabini was at thirty-five. Tracey Davis was credited of one more point than the Zabini Heir. Lucian Bole received from Dumbledore, Bagman, and the other judges a grand total of forty points.

“This is a really bad joke,” her Irish friend articulated coldly. “They gave me forty points and I finished in fifty-two minutes yesterday, in far worse weather conditions. Bole took close to two hours to complete the trial!”

“They must have changed the method of grading the students today,” Hermione said absently.

“Yes,” Alexandra approved, “otherwise they would have been forced to give final grades between ten and zero. The time delays alone would have been enough to disqualify everyone otherwise.”

This Tournament was a scheduled disaster for House Slytherin. Two junior Death Eaters and the majority of the ‘muscle’, plus Davis and Zabini, but the latter had proved to buckle under their Prefects’ authority – or the other people who held authority in their House these days.

Finally, Theodore Nott received forty-five points and Cassius Warrington emerged as the ‘victor’ with fifty points.

“Your opinion, Alex?”

The Potter Heiress scratched her forehead in consternation.

“If Warrington is the Slytherin Champion, Hogwarts will need a second Slytherin Champion on the evening after the First Task.”

**12 January 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It was a brand new year, and they had a not-so brand new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor.

By the dark lands of Mordor, DADA was a disaster. And the worst part of it was that Alexandra was sure it had not been unavoidable in the first place. Obviously, the moment the Headmaster was sure there was a curse on the position, he should have started to bring the foremost experts of Britain and the continent – if his own skills weren’t up to the task, that is.

But between her discussions with Flitwick and many searches in the archives of the *Daily Prophet*, the Ravenclaw witch had been unable to find evidence of famous curse-breakers being invited to Hogwarts. That didn’t mean there had not been curse-breaking attempts; it was just that no one who had taught at Hogwarts and that she could reasonably trust remembered them.

That still didn’t explain why the Headmaster thought it was ‘good’ to hire incompetent teachers. Lockhart may have been playing the role of a fraud, but between him and Quirrell, Alexandra could say without lying that the few interesting points could be spoken in a couple of minutes, and it began with ‘don’t trust the DADA teacher’.

“Quirrell, Lockhart, Rincewind and now Lupin...” Alexandra whispered to Morag as they walked to the new DADA classroom. “That’s four Senior DADA teachers in three years and we’re still in January. What are the Weasley Twins saying?”

“For the moment, nobody believes Lupin will last until May. You know, with Bellatrix Lestrange free and Rincewind sacked for not being present during the Battle of Hogsmeade.”

Alexandra gave her an ironic look. It was true that a lot of bad things happened at Hogwarts...that said, unless Bellatrix Lestrange was crazier than the affirmations the Ministry was sprouting, she was unlikely to storm into the castle. The Dark Witch had been sane enough to go to the ICW and get a trial which exonerated her internationally. Infiltrating Hogwarts would be tantamount to giving Dumbledore fresh ammunition for a new trial.

“The new teacher is friends with our most esteemed Defeater of Grindelwald. I don’t think his future will include a departure in disgrace...”

As always when they followed Hermione, they were the first students of the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff third years to arrive in the DADA classroom.

It was a classroom they knew well, for it was the one Lockhart had chosen to expose the photos of his ‘most charming smile’, release – once – the Cornish Pixies, and generally make sure no one was taking him seriously.

The decoration had changed a lot, honestly. The photos of Lockhart had obviously disappeared and been replaced by some newspaper articles about XX or XXX-class creatures like Kappas, Grindylows or Ghouls. There was a duellist dummy in the back of the classroom, though it looked like it was a really old model which might have served for their grandparents.

And there was a cage containing a Red Cap right next to the teacher’s desk. Or at least what Alexandra assumed was a Red Cap. She had never seen one in the flesh before today.

“I just hope our new Professor is not going to imitate Lockhart. A Red Cap is categorised as a XXX creature.”

Granted it was more because the Red Caps loved the safety of numbers and in general tried to overwhelm their opponents, but still. If the school books were correct, the more their ‘red caps’ were bathed in blood, the more resistant they were to magic and other weapons. They were as such an opponent best kept on the defensive from the very beginning.

“I don’t like the way it is looking at us,” Nigel murmured as the other Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs arrived in the classroom.

“I can’t blame you.” Hermione replied. “The Red Cap looks like an evil dwarfish gnome...”

In medieval times, it had been theorised by many wizards that the Red Caps were created by the torrents of human blood a battlefield created. While it had been proven untrue two centuries ago, there was no questioning the creatures were constantly migrating in search of places where magical blood had altered the atmosphere and the aura of the buildings.

In few words, the Red Cap was an unpleasant creature the Ministry considered a pest, and it looked the part. The yellow irises were shining with viciousness and cruelty. The black-green face could have been used for the skins of the orcs of Middle Earth. The ‘cap’ was a black-red and it was not strawberries which had been crushed on it.

“Good morning class,” Professor Lupin arrived mere seconds after Zacharias Smith.

“Good morning, Professor.”

The new DADA teacher looked less like a person who had been living on the streets today. To be sure, Remus Lupin wasn’t going to win any prize in a beauty contest, but his robes looked like they had been bought in a decent shop and his face was less gaunt and exhausted than it had been in December. Maybe Dumbledore had argued he’d better take care of his appearance after the Slytherins sent letters of protests to their parents.

The names were rapidly called, and Alexandra didn’t like the long three seconds the man stared at her. No, she didn’t like it at all, and the hydra senses that were now an integral part of her told her to attack. It was a struggle to ignore it.

“I received a long report from Professor Rincewind during the holidays,” Lupin spoke in a tone that was very much one of a scholar. “It seems his methods of teaching were...unconventional.”

Alexandra had to agree the word was accurate. Too bad this didn’t mean that much at Hogwarts. Trelawney’s Divination classes were also greatly ‘unconventional’ and not in the good sense of the term.

“My focus for this semester will be to teach you the most common species you may have to defend yourself against outside these walls. As I understand previous teachers were a bit remiss in their duties, we will practise the spells, be they Charms, jinxes, or hexes, which will be useful against XX, XXX and XXXX creatures. Your end-of-the-year exam will have a large practical part and I hope you will all thrive in it. Yes, Mr. Smith?”

The arrogant Hufflepuff had indeed raised his hand, and several of his housemates were already grimacing.

“We have studied several XXXXX-class Dark Creatures with Professor Rincewind...like the vampires.” It was ephemeral, but the calm green eyes were for a second or two utterly furious at the mention of ‘vampires’. “Are we going to learn the spells to defend ourselves against them?”

“No, these spells won’t be learned in third year, Mr. Smith,” the DADA Professor answered. “Assuming they exist, that is. There are legal incantations who give you the ability to repel Dementors, Lethifolds, or skinchangers, but these are extremely difficult to master and considerably exhausting for magical cores like those of your fellow third-years. Many of them are part of the sixth-year curriculum and you will be taught them assuming you want to pursue a NEWT in Defence Against the Dark Arts.”

There was also the assumption the man or the woman who would be teaching the course in three years would be half-way competent with a DADA Mastery or an equivalent under their belt. And it wasn’t a given. Rincewind certainly had the willingness and the power to throw around dangerous spells, but Quirrell and Lockhart certainly didn’t.

“It is best not to forget however that certain magical species like dragons or giants have such magic-resistant scales or skins that they can shrug off the most powerful incantations of a wizard. In this case, the prowess of one wizard will be insufficient and the best tactics are to wait for reinforcements or flee where the creature can’t hurt you.”

His wand pointed at the cage and suddenly the prison of the Red Cap was shining brightly.

“Now today we are going to learn about Red Caps. Who can tell me what Red Caps are?”

Hermione’s hand was in the air before the last word of the question had been voiced.

“Miss Granger?”

“A Red Cap is a small creature cousin of the goblins. It lives in large holes where human bloodshed has been particularly important, like old and recent battlegrounds, ancient foundations of human castles and execution grounds. They hunt in group and can bludgeon people to death with bones and improvised masses if given time. The Red Caps are nocturnal and are more commonly found in Germany and Northern Europe, although it is not rare to find them in Russia and other countries on the continent.

“I couldn’t have given a better definition,” Lupin complimented their bushy-haired expert. “Five points to Ravenclaw.”

Hermione naturally smiled. Alexandra delivered a smirk to Morag and voiced silently ‘Lockhart’. Morag giggled.

“As Miss Granger said perfectly, Red Caps are group hunters. Now, while these fiendish creatures prefer attacking rodents and little animals to feed themselves, they have a deep hatred in their very souls for humans, be they wizards or Muggles. It has been widely observed that given the chance between attacking a rabbit and a human, the Red Cap will always choose the human, no matter how unfavourable the rapport of strength is. Now...Mr. Finch-Fletchey, can you tell me the best spell to use against a hostile Red Cap?”

“Expelliarmus, Professor.” The Potter Heiress repressed a groan. Sometimes the Hufflepuffs were really too nice for their own good.

“It will certainly have an effect, since the Red Caps in their natural habitats have bone tool-weapons. But it won’t be the most optimal use of your magic. Remember, Mr. Finch-Fletchey, that Red Caps live exactly in the sort of places where old rusted weapons and bones abound. Unless you massively overpower your Disarming Charm, you won’t be able to knock out or significantly inconvenience the Red Cap. One point to Hufflepuff. Now, one by one I want you to...”

Despite her initial fears that Remus Lupin was another incompetent lackey of Dumbledore, the man was competent, of that there was no doubt. Order of the Phoenix’s member or no, the ex-Marauder knew his subject and had, unlike many of his predecessors, the required credentials to teach the class.

Of course, it left the question of why Dumbledore had been unable to convince him to teach...unless politics and public pressure where were-beings were concerned had forced the Chief Warlock to hire someone else.

Setting aside these issues, it was a good class and Professor Lupin could teach them Defence Against the Dark Arts. One by one, they discussed the merits of spells from first to fourth-year neutralising these blood-cap goblins’ cousins and in the last ten minutes the Professor enlarged the cage sufficiently for them to throw jinxes and Charms and prove the aforementioned theories.

To say it was less stressful and weird than the ‘lessons’ of Rincewind was evident. And Professor Lupin would have an unconditional supporter in Hermione. Her friend had won thirty points and had been suitably complimented for her knowledge. Sometimes, the ever-knowledgeable bookworm resurfaced and then, the world could brace for the aftershocks...

The bell rang and the DADA books, the quills, and the inkpots found their way back into the school bags.

“Miss Potter, could you stay behind for one minute please?”

Damn it. She had hoped for a few minutes with Susan...

“Certainly, Professor,” the green-eyed Ravenclaw replied, her visage not showing her frustration. Because for one, she had other things to do than speak with a DADA Professor at the moment. And for two...well, the man had been a friend of her father, yet his participation in her life achieved the impressive feat of being inferior to the sad example provided by Sirius Black.

The door closed on Megan Jones and thanks to her improved senses Alexandra could not help but hear ‘Hope she won’t kill this one, he’s a good teacher’...

And Alexandra was left alone with Remus Lupin. Who, for a reason she couldn’t imagine, seemed suddenly nervous...

“Miss Potter, I don’t know if you have been informed, but...”

“If you want to ask if I know you were a friend of my father, yes I know.” Alexandra raised an eyebrow. “I am a Ravenclaw, Professor. Knowledge and how to acquire more are our specialties, and between the *Daily Prophet* archives, certain public Ministry bookcases, and this school’s records, it was not that difficult to forge my own opinion on your teenage years and what happened once you left this school.”

It was somehow reassuring to see Remus Lupin didn’t begin to shout everything she had read and heard in the last two and a half years was a complete fabrication.

“I know the little group of pranksters you created spent their time fighting against Slytherins and increased their record of detentions to astronomical numbers. I know they became Animagi on their own, more likely to help you. I know you are a werewolf, it’s not like your name isn’t on the Ministry records.”

“Impressive,” the ex-Marauder answered. “At your age, I would not have been so curious. And James certainly wouldn’t have been.”

Alexandra gritted her teeth.

“I would thank you for not mentioning this name in my presence.”

“He’s your father.” The reprimand in the voice was noticed and immediately ignored.

“By blood, he is,” the Potter Heiress acknowledged. “But apart from this, I thought hard and long about this...and we have nothing in common. The eldest son of Lord Potter lived in Potter Manor, spent his childhood as a spoilt brat, and when he came to Hogwarts, he wasted a lot of potential pranking Slytherins when a smart strategist would have tried to convince them to end this imbecilic inter-House feud between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Or failing that, try to stop many of the junior blood-purists from joining the Death Eater ranks.”

Alexandra clicked her fingers negligently. Lupin didn’t immediately answer her tirade, but it was in a less-than-confident tone.

“For all the information you have managed to unearth, you are not aware of the full picture...”

Alexandra chuckled.

“I know enough. You have been a fighter in the wars of the Light against the Darkness, haven’t you?”

The werewolf narrowed his eyes. Alexandra sighed in an exaggerated fashion.

“Well, this conversation was very enlightening, Professor, but I’m afraid I have other obligations today. For the record, you are my second favourite Marauder now that I’ve met the full roster.”

“You can’t have met...”

This was the advantage with werewolves. It wasn’t full-proof, but most of the time they could tell when someone was lying in their presence. Lady Zabini had not told her how she had gained this information, and Alexandra hadn’t asked, but judging by Lupin’s troubled expression this was completely exact.

“Where was he? Where did you meet Peter?”

“But here, of course. The Marauders always return to their theatre of exploits, one way or another...”

Too bad she had no camera on hand. The face of Remus Lupin on a photo would have given her plenty of Galleons in pocket money.

**16 January 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“I’m quite glad to not be on the pitch today. Flint is certainly not mellowing for his last year at Hogwarts.”

With a couple of the regular Quidditch team members having improved their grades, Alexandra was the Reserve Seeker again.

It wasn’t a demotion which was making her sad and mournful. The sole game she had played against Gryffindor had not exactly given her the motivation of Oliver Wood or the Bludger addiction of the Weasley Twins.

No, today Alexandra was quite content to stay in the stands with her friends.

“It’s Slytherin at its finest. What did you expect from them?”

“The Krakatau Coyote is on its way to hurt the wrackspurts.”

“The Snakes’ victory against Hufflepuff was unexpected, but this was a morale-booster,” Nigel commented after Luna. “They beat Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw won against Gryffindor. Should they win against our House team, their last game would be a final against Gryffindor. Gryffindor defeated Hufflepuff 230-30 yesterday; the Badgers are out of the game for the Cup.”

“Joy.” The majority of Hogwarts, Nurse and Professors included, was particularly ecstatic when the Gryffindor-Slytherin year game was over. The rivalry during the week before each game was climbing with each exchange of low-level curses and esoteric humiliations. And that was for an unfriendly confrontation in November when the season opened. The Morrigan only knew how bad a final would be between the proud Lions and the vicious Snakes.

“DAVIES SCORES AND THE CROWD GOES WILD! 20-10 FOR RAVENCLAW!”

“Is it me or did Lee Jordan take inspiration from Ludovic Bagman today?” asked Hermione.

“It isn’t you.” For the sake of whatever sanity was left in the Scottish school, Alexandra hoped there wouldn’t be a second version of the Departmental Head of Sports appearing in her lifetime. “And I certainly hope it is just a trend he will forget in a few weeks.”

“Impossible if Bagman is there for all the preliminaries.”

Alexandra grimaced. Yes, she had neglected that little detail.

“I don’t like him. And the information we have on him is...concerning.”

“Bagman?” Morag asked rhetorically and continuing after she nodded. “Yes, I understand why. There were very serious accusations of spying and selling information to known Death Eaters at the end of the last war. But he was extremely popular as a Quidditch player, and the charges were dropped after a show-trial.”

“Unbelievable,” the Basilisk-Slayer muttered under her breath. However, it was all the more believable in hindsight. The Ministry has bungled so much of the trial of Bellatrix Lestrange and several Death Eaters that the ICW had immediately declared it null and void. Why couldn’t the same thing have happened in reverse? “And the man is now the Head of the Department of Games and Sports. I wonder what sort of Tournament he would consider ‘fun’ to participate in should Hogwarts have hosted it...”

Alexandra removed one of her quills – a feather she had convinced Atalanta to give her before moving to Zabini Manor - and a blank roll of parchment from her pocket and started to write a short letter to her guardian. It would be interesting to know what sort of activities Bagman had invested into since Voldemort was removed explosively by Neville Longbottom.

The Ravenclaw and Slytherin Chasers each scored twice before she finished her message.

When the black-haired teenager raised her head again, it was to see Morag look at her curiously.

“Your quill...it’s not one of the ones sold at Scrivenshaft’s.”

“Err...yes. I wanted to see if I could make my own quills after Flitwick explained to us the basics last week.”

“He didn’t teach us to cast the spells,” her red-haired friend remarked.

“I didn’t use Charms...too much. I used my athame to carve runes on the rachis of one of Atalanta’s feathers. That way whatever spell I imbue the runes with will have months-lasting properties.”

This was the moment Hermione chose to intervene.

“You can’t carve many Futhark runes in miniature,” the ex-Gryffindor girl said in a teacher-like mode. “Professor Babbling always insist the glyphs must have a certain size and the quill is far too small to respect that law...”

“Yes, and that’s why I used Egyptian hieroglyphs.” Alexandra admitted. “It’s not perfect, but I was able to write twelve hieroglyphs with glasses and a night of experiments.” Two of the quills she had used as ‘test subjects’ had been incinerated on the spot when she had tried to activate them.

“What were you able to add?” Morag said as she watched her with this fire in her blue eyes that sometimes confirmed for her that yes, the English were all crazy.

“It has minor resistance to fire damage, self-filling ink, the blue, black, and red colours, and a password. On average it took two hieroglyphs and a few incantations to add each feature.”

“Fantastic! I want one! After that, we will commercialise it!”

Alexandra groaned and tried to put a stop to one of Morag’s infernal ideas before it was too late.

“May I remind you that what I’m trying with my quills and hieroglyphs is in no way approved by Professor Babbling...”

“And what the Weasley Twins are doing is in no way approved by the staff either, but nobody has ever denounced them. That argument is rejected. One Galleon for you if you can rune-empower my new owl quill before Wednesday.”

“Hey, by a strangest coincidence we need enchanted quills for our writing activities,” Alexandra looked at Nigel with consternation. If she couldn’t even count on the journalist to temper Morag’s fire-spitting tendencies, all was lost...

Fortunately, Cho Chang caught the Golden Snitch thirty seconds later ending the game 200-50 in Ravenclaw’s favour and the celebrations lasted in their Common Tower for the rest of the afternoon and the early evening...

**22 January 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Forty Galleons?”

It was always interesting to see when the perfect image of the Ice Queen fractured and Daphne Greengrass’ true feelings came to the front.

“Yes, the orders for my improved quills in one week have reached forty Galleons, Daphne. It seems the average quality of the quills one purchases at Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley leaves a lot to be desired.”

“I can certainly see that,” the Slytherin girl said as she studied her owl quill that had just received a hieroglyph-based modification.

“It’s certainly better than the common goods sold at Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop or Amanuensis Quills,” Susan said as she examined the thirty-plus modified quills at the centre of the table. “I don’t think anyone in Britain is selling this sort of quill in bulk. Maybe some Enchanters are doing special orders, but they have to be one-time things. It’s certainly very useful, Alexandra.”

The compliment from her girlfriend gave her a warm feeling everywhere inside her body, though she had never thought that what she did was particularly impressive. True, she was using some specific rune-carving tools and it had taken some effort, but Alexandra had not thought to be the first one to think about modifying quills that way.

“I suppose you are going to protect this invention under your name, just in case?” asked the Greengrass Heiress.

“The parchment work has been expedited,” the Potter teenager confirmed. “There should be no great obstacles with the Ministry licenses. Quills are quills, obviously. And runes are utilised everywhere in our society. Forbidding this combination would raise a lot of questions.”

“Remember it is new and the Ministry is the Ministry,” Daphne advised, her icy expression back like it had always been there. “You intend to open a shop under your own name to commercialise these quills?”

Alexandra shook her head.

“I was thinking more about investing in a brand-new business and remaining the principal investor. Don’t get me wrong, I love Runes, but creating the same type of objects over and over is not my cup of tea. I prefer creating a few rune-powered objects here and there, and then selling them via an existing shop I can control than doing it as a full-time profession.”

“It’s your decision,” the blonde-haired Slytherin replied. “But I can already tell you the search for an employee is going to be difficult. You have explained your methods to Susan and I, and we are able to replicate them to an extent, but you remain far more talented than us, and you’re just beginning.”

“I love the compliments, Daphne,” Alexandra imitated the purr of Crookshanks after that.

“No, you really have an impressive talent with Runes. You understand Futhark, Ogham, and Hieroglyphs far better than anyone in our year, including Hermione Granger and Padma Patil. That’s why I think you will need someone with at least an ‘E’ in the OWL of Ancient Runes.”

“I have contacted a seventh-year student who had an ‘O’ on the subject and is still studying the class for her NEWTs.”

Susan’s eyes lost themselves in thought, but Daphne Greengrass was far faster than the red-haired Hufflepuff.

“Penelope Clearwater.”

“Yes, Penelope is the student I’ve approached.” The Ravenclaw seventh-year girl was a genuinely nice witch. Moreover, she had learned many Runic languages in the last few years: Elder and Lesser Futhark, Norse, Inca, and Sumerian Runes. Save maybe Percival Weasley – who had gained in the last months the well-deserved nickname of Humongous Bighead – Penelope was certainly the best student expert on Runes Hogwarts had. And unfortunately for her, the fact the Ministry was filled with bigots and ‘pardoned’ Death Eaters or their supporters, had, for the present, denied her the chance to have a promising Ministry position or a worthwhile Apprenticeship when she would leave Hogwarts in May. “She’s willing to accept, provided everything is legal and there are investors ready.”

In this instance, having already supported the dream of the Weasley Twins on their ‘WWW’ prank-shop was a god-send, because she already knew the mistakes to avoid.

“You don’t really need us,” Susan pointed out. “If the rumours are true, your vaults received a mountain of gold last October...”

“I will neither confirm nor deny this,” the Potter Heiress smiled. “But for the moment let’s assume you are right, Susan. I don’t need you to invest in this newly created shop. But given how many hours we work together in Runes, my ideas are in part your ideas. Yes, the magically rune-reinforced quills are my idea, but you could easily have something equally good to propose in the coming months.”

The two other girls looked each other directly in the eyes for several seconds before turning their heads in her direction.

“Even if you are the majority owner and Penelope Clearwater is your employee, I will need the support of my parents and Susan will need her Aunt’s. We have large trust vaults, but removing over a thousand Galleons without their support would not be appreciated.”

“Of course.” Unlike with Fred and George, it was not something that needed to be kept secret for at least one more year. And the market was not going to experience an upheaval until the new shop opened. Scrivenshaft’s and Amanuensis didn’t sell rune-powered quills at all. In fact, most of their sales were cheap and disposable quills. The inks you could purchase there were also of lower quality. “But I will still want an answer as soon as possible. Financing a project isn’t something that can be left unanswered until the first bills begin to pile on one’s desk.”

“You’re definitely right about that,” Susan approved. “If my auntie approves, we will...”

The next hour was spent discussing the possibilities offered by the business and the sums involved. Then the trio returned to their studies of Hieroglyphs and Elder Futhark Runes. Galleons or no Galleons, they had a lot more to learn about the ancient glyphs of long-extinct magical civilisations.

**31 January 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The library was becoming more and more indispensable to deal with the Potions’ homework these days. Second-year essays seemed really easy now that they had to complete papers three times the length of what they wrote last year.

And if that wasn’t enough, Snape and Whitehead were beginning to use some elements of Arithmancy in their Potion recipes. It was really subtle for the moment, and students who had taken the elective did not gain much advantage from it, but it was there and it was enough to give her an urge to cut her hair with a Diffindo.

Alexandra always was in the top ten of the third-years in Potions, but she did not have the near-eidetic memory of Hermione. And a perfect memory was exactly what was required to learn Potion instructions and never forget them. Occlumency had never seemed so tempting...or it would have been, if the notorious side-effects didn’t carry such catastrophic mental problems with them.

Needless to say, Alexandra wasn’t looking forwards to the sessions Snape and his junior subordinate had created for post-OWL teenagers. And yet, it was out of the question to neglect this fundamental class.

Astronomy may have some importance in Herbology, Rituals, and some esoteric calculations, but the green-eyed Ravenclaw didn’t want to spend her life working at night on a subject she had never warmed to.

History was of course something she would never pursue for her NEWTs. Why continue the class when reading a good book could give you a hundred times more information than Binns and Tiroflan?

 No, until she knew for sure what job she wanted to specialise into, Alexandra knew she had to work a lot on the important classes, and Potions definitely qualified. It opened the door to too many high-qualified positions, and somehow the Potter Heiress doubted the OWL examiners would hand out an ‘O’ because ‘they had survived the Slytherin Potion Masters for five years’.

“Stop hiding behind the shelves Hannah...or change the colour of your orange-yellow shoes, they are far too visible in this library.”

Susan’s friend left her hiding place with a sheepish expression. Alexandra didn’t see really why she was hiding. Did the Hufflepuff believe the rumours she was studying forbidden magic to increase her core in the middle of the library? As if she would do something stupid with Dumbledore present at Hogwarts today. There was a time and a place to take risks, and that wasn’t today with the stern-looking librarian fifty feet away.

“Potion essays?”

“How did you guess?” the raven-haired girl demanded lightly. “It seems the Gryffindors who preceded us Monday morning angered Whitehead and Snape fiercely, because the minimum length of this essay is twice the length of the most difficult assignment we had during autumn.”

“I didn’t even know you could use Mongolian ice-ants in a Potion,” Hannah shivered slightly. “I lost two points for something no one save Granger knew...”

Yeah, once again Snape had been his charming-self. It was good this year was a random alternation of the Senior and Junior Professors.

“But I suppose you didn’t come to tell me the Potion homework is an awful chore.”

“No. Susan sent me.” Hannah bit her lips nervously. “Professor Sprout has let Cedric know she has ordered several...unusual plants from the Amazon basin.”

That wasn’t good at all. The non-magical Amazon basin could be extremely dangerous if you didn’t know what you were dealing with. The magical version of this region was far more dangerous, not less. In fact, the Amazon was still one of the few places on Earth where the Statute could not be totally enforced. There were plenty of magical species which were still discovered year after year, and the wizards and witches on the ground were far too few to keep a lid on everything.

“The first preliminary was the ice. If we assume the Headmaster went with a four elements-theme and didn’t try to apply lightning into a trial, the second preliminary will be an earth challenge.”

It was a nice warning; unfortunately it left plenty of unknowns. For one thing, there were thousands of dangerous plants in the Brazilian forests. Plus it didn’t give her a clue as to how the judges would test the potential champions.

“Thank you, Hannah, for the warning.” An idle thought came to her mind. “If Cedric knows, does this mean this time the four Houses will participate one after another?”

“Our Head of House was certain about it.”

And somehow Alexandra didn’t think Dumbledore would lie to the nice Herbology Professor about this. It would bring him no benefits. And besides, there had already been plenty of critiques about how the Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs had not been sent on the Black Lake with the rest of the ‘Champions’. Accusations of coddling them had been made in the *Daily Prophet* after this frisky week-end, and Rita Skeeter’s quills were really venomous when their owner wanted them to be.

“Well, I’m going to refresh my fire spells. Just in case, you understand.”

Some of the plants they studied in the greenhouses were only friendly in the carnivorous sense of the term. And there was a reason no one wore his best clothes in Herbology past the first classes...

“Good luck, though I don’t think you will need it...”

**Author’s note**: Sprout is a very nice teacher, but when plants are involved, she can be as ruthless as Snape...and now most of the non-Hufflepuff Champions are really, really worried.

There will be a new preliminary next chapter...and another issue will come back to haunt certain protagonists.

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