**Chapter 66**

**Icy Semester**

**4 January 1994, Hogwarts Express**

“Seriously...how many infractions does it take to really expel someone from Hogwarts?” Alexandra asked dejectedly as she fell on the last free seat in the compartment reserved by her friends.

“I see you have seen the presence of Leo Black and Ron Weasley...” the Ravenclaw redhead replied.

“Of course I have!” Despite all efforts to be calm, the Potter Heiress almost snarled the words. It took three large breaths before she was able to resume and repeat in a far more neutral voice what had come out of her mouth. “Of course I have. It isn’t like they made a mystery of their presence at King’s Cross.”

Really, this was probably an understatement of the highest order. The two suspended Gryffindors – or ex-suspended Gryffindors now she supposed - had been surrounded by a crowd of Light supporters, both adults and children.

Needless to say, it left a very bad taste in her mouth. Yes, it had been possible Ron Weasley would come back by January, but it had been the most optimistic date, and for it to happen the red-haired loudmouth should have accomplished an impressive academic catch-up that would have been complicated for a top third-year student to do in so little time – the period of suspension had lasted from October to December.

Some part of her whispered it was possible Weasley had seen the error of his ways and finally started to take his studies seriously. For all their faults and weaknesses, there was no denying that the children of Arthur and Molly Weasley were brilliant. The eldest was an elite Curse-Breaker. The second son was a Dragon Tamer. Percy was becoming more and more the image of a stuck-up prat, but he had excellent memory skills and a polyvalent background in every type of magic taught at Hogwarts. The Twins were geniuses in innovation and inventing new pranks. Ginny-Scylla was one of the top second-year students and very powerful for her age and someone not sworn to a Power.

So yes, as unlikely as it was, Ron Weasley could very well have woke up and in three months resolved himself to become a model of academic success.

And maybe Alexandra would have believed it...if Leo Black wasn’t next to him.

Because unlike the Gryffindor sidekick, there was no legitimate reason the Black Heir could be legally authorised to return to Hogwarts today if the initial decisions of the Board of Governors were enforced in the spirit they had been written. It just wasn’t possible. Leo Black, son of the oath-breaker Sirius Black, should not have been back before April or May, and that was the most optimistic timetable.

Someone must have pulled a lot of strings behind the scenes, and the black-haired Ravenclaw had a good idea who was behind this latest breach of the Board’s authority.

“It must be Dumbledore’s work,” Hermione said, having arrived at the same conclusion she did. “No one else has the influence, the political power, and more importantly, the motivation.”

Alexandra raised both eyebrows.

“I follow you on the influence and the political power, but the motivation?”

Hermione gave her a small smile.

“Leo Black is not only the Heir of House Black, one of the most fervent supporters the Headmaster has on his side. And Ron Weasley is not just the youngest son of the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office. They were both the best friends of a certain Neville Longbottom before their suspension...and in the days after their departure, the Boy-Who-Lived began to behave differently. He was spending far more time with Finnigan, Thomas, Patil, and Brown before the Winter Holidays, and not once did he try to defend the Light-extremists views of the after-Quidditch disaster and the Battle of Hogsmeade.”

The green-eyed Ravenclaw snorted.

“You make it sound like the Boy-Who-Lived is going to join up with the Dark Traditionalists in a few months.”

“He went with a Slytherin girl to the Hofburg Ball,” Nigel spoke quietly.

“Sure,” Alexandra answered, “and when they weren’t forced to be close to each other, I don’t think I saw two people as disinterested and mutually murderous as those two. Not to mention Blackford tried to crush Neville’s feet or dig her nails into his hand. No, we all know the reason the Boy-Who-Lived asked her was because there was no one else available.”

It was one of the perils of inviting a limited pool of twenty boys and twenty girls without the possibility of inter-school couples.

“But his pranking activities have decreased to almost nothing. And he doesn’t support McLaggen and the majority of the older Gryffindors in their new anti-Slytherin and anti-Ravenclaw movement,” Hermione added.

Yes, it was difficult to argue against that. Still, it was convoluted...and the Potter Heiress wanted to believe that for all his Machiavellian and controlling tendencies, Albus Dumbledore was not so far gone that he would feel the sheer need to control the orphaned son of two loyal supporters who had given their lives to vanquish Voldemort.

“It could backfire.” Alexandra commented. “And when I say that, I can easily think of four or five scenarios where our most esteemed Chief Warlock and Headmaster will see his plans collapse in a most impressive way.”

Leo Black and Ron Weasley could break up completely with Longbottom by joining the McLaggen group. The trio could return to their infernal pranking ways and be suspended, this time permanently, by an irritated Board of Governors. The abuse of influence could force the Headmaster to be suspended himself if more crimes were revealed by official investigators.

The death of Grindelwald had resolidified again Dumbledore’s powerbase, but it was not the 1945 victory where the war-hero had triumphed against all odds. Too many scandals had rocked Hogwarts’ foundations in recent years. There was too much evidence the ‘old-wise-caring-grandfather’ could be wrong like the common wizard and provoke massive catastrophes on his own.

“Yes,” Morag gave her a nod of agreement. “On the other hand, the Tournament is coming. And if Longbottom is designated as the Gryffindor Champion, he will need his ‘best friends’ by his side. I don’t know when the preliminaries will begin, but I doubt the first event will be in May...”

The Champion of the Morrigan wasn’t convinced at all.

“The problem with this reasoning is that it’s far from certain Neville Longbottom will be the Gryffindor Champion. Unlike House Ravenclaw, the students of the Lion’s Pride who have signed up for this insanity are rumoured to be above fifteen in number, not five. There are many fifth-year and sixth-year Gryffindors ready to seize their chance at glory. Boy-Who-Lived or not, Neville Longbottom has a chance to become the Gryffindor Champion...it’s just not a good one. Fred, George, the girls of the Quidditch team, Cormac McLaggen, Hooper...that’s a lot of opposition. And Leo Black and Ron Weasley do not have many advantages save their pranks and some fourth-year level spells.”

Nothing official had come from the Professors, but you didn’t need to be a genius to realise that while the selections of House Slytherin and House Ravenclaw were going to be jokes due to a lack of candidates, House Hufflepuff and House Gryffindor were going to be anything but. And save a few exceptions, in general an older student provided a lot of raw power as well as knowledge of esoteric and conventional spells that younger students lacked.

“I suppose we will see if I’m right or not in a few days,” Hermione said as the Hogwarts Express at last began to move and the journey to northern Scotland officially commenced.

Their discussion shifted to far happier subjects a few minutes later. Morag’s mother, Lady Isobel MacDougal, was pregnant. If fortune smiled on the Irish House, there would be a new addition to the ranks of the MacDougal family before the end of the 1994 year. The red-haired Heiress had also unlocked her Animagus form and began the long process of trying to appease her inner animal.

“The Nargles don’t love orange fur,” Luna told Morag in a very serious tone before returning to her perusal of the *Quibbler*.

All the other Ravenclaws present in the compartment exchanged glances of amusement. Real or not, the creatures Luna Lovegood always mentioned were something that never failed to attract weird remarks.

“Speaking of newspapers, are we ready to...” Alexandra had not the time to ask whether the next Loud Duck was ready for publication. Someone knocked at the door, and since it was Lyre on the other side, they all murmured Finite Incantatem and other counter-Charms to let her enter.

“You’re early, Lyre. We weren’t supposed to meet before tomorrow.”

“I know.” And the French-born Slytherin presented her right hand. A second later, and an imposing ring flashed into existence. The Potter Heiress had never seen it before, but it did not require much imagination to recognise the object for what it was. Of a silvery colour, shaped like an angel with sapphire eyes and imbued with magic, if it was not a Lady’s ring, she was ready to eat her winter boots.

“I see.” And it was not a figure of speech. For this ring to appear anywhere near Lyre’s fingers, her father had to be dead. And by ‘dead’, Alexandra meant truly dead, one hundred percent dead, not the pathetic excuse ‘we don’t know who took him from the hospital and abducted him for several months’. “You have my condolences, Lyre.”

“Thank you, Alexandra.”

The other Exiled voiced their own apologies, and after a couple minutes of silence to remember the fallen Curse-Breaker, the survivor of Brise-Roc spoke again.

“The more I learn about the Army of Light, the more I am convinced the Exchequer keep them around for the entertainment value.”

“That’s...maybe a bit unfair,” Morag hesitantly replied, as Lyre sent her a glare that could not be described as friendly. “They aren’t the brightest minds around, but...”

Her friend was unable to find proper excuses for the Light fanatics, though.

“Let me remind you that there is a maximum of seven Light Champions at any given time in the world,” Lyre said in a condescending tone. “They are a priceless resource and extremely valuable weapons for any organisation. Yet the idiots chose to send one to Hogsmeade, along with his Apprentice...on a day which is infamous for being a ‘Sabbat day’. They could not have asked more loudly for something to go wrong. And now they’ve killed my father...one of the rare people who could have given a report of what exactly went wrong at Brise-Roc.”

“To be fair...” Hermione bit her lower lip before finishing her sentence. “He was in a coma and likely would have never woken up.”

The blue eyes of Lyre de Male-Foi for an instant looked like hell had frozen over.

“Intellectually, I know that. But where there’s life, there’s hope. Moreover, they showed how much they cared for the reports of my father by ending his life and trying to steal my inheritance. It’s so easy to discard broken toys and support the ascension of second-line ambitious thieves for a mountain of gold and some political support!”

Alexandra felt anger bubbling under her surface and had to struggle with her emotions...her arms were covering themselves in scales under her robes.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t stay unbiased. After all, what the Male-Foi secondary branch had tried against Lyre was exactly what had happened to the Potter properties and assets once her parents had been removed from the board.

The Army of Light and the Order of the Phoenix’s similarities clearly did not stop at their incredible incompetence, their willingness to shed the blood of witches and wizards believing in their ideals, and losing wars against Dark Wizards. They were also united in stealing the funds and the inheritance of children once the parents had perished in tragic ‘accidents’ and ‘tragedies’.

“I trust the other members of House Male-Foi won’t be a problem anymore?”

“They won’t,” the blonde-haired Slytherin confirmed with a smile that told everyone in the compartment the ‘family’ of Lyre hadn’t perished in an easy and painless manner.

“Good. Now our main priorities where these Light hypocrites are concerned is to see how far their tendrils have sunk into the Academy of Beauxbatons’ student and teacher bodies. Optimistically, I wish we could remove the bad apples before next September, but we lack the manpower to do so.”

“Realistically, I think we’d better contact a few chosen pro-Grey older students and have them spy on Fleur Delacour and whoever is known for extreme Light political agendas in the French school,” Morag proposed.

“I will need a couple of months at the very least to establish some promising leads,” Lyre shrugged.

“That should do,” Alexandra approved. “I do not have a major operation planned for before Beltane. The Twins and our auxiliaries will need this time to refurbish and repair our flagship.”

“Ah yes, the *HMS Hydra*.”

The Champion of the Morrigan groaned loudly.

“No, for the fifth time, it’s the *HMS Dreadnought*...”

**5 January 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Their Head of House’s office was still as welcoming as it had been before the holidays. In no particular order the qualities which made it such an appreciated part of the castle were: the bright yellow enchanted fire, the delicious biscuits, the warm tea, and the friendly behaviour of the owner.

Undoubtedly some Gryffindors and Slytherins would scoff at the materialist needs of the Ravenclaws, but no one really worked well when surrounded by unpleasant surroundings. The weather on the other side of the office’s window was happy to demonstrate this evidence. It had begun snowing this morning, and Hogwarts had a large white mantle covering everything, frequently shifting under the cold winds.

That the Gryffindor Quidditch players had not tried to murder Captain Oliver Wood when he had chosen this evening for a training session was a mystery for the ages.

So yes, the office of Professor Flitwick was a place Alexandra didn’t fear going to. Sure, there had been bad news delivered in this room, but the same thing could be said for the Great Hall, and she went there at least three times per day. And besides, it was often not their tiny Head of House’s faults there was bad news in the first place. No, quite often the source of the problems was higher in the magical school’s hierarchy.

Like today.

“I’m sorry, Professor,” Roger Davies told the Charms Master in a tone that was not sorry at all, “but has the Headmaster become crazy?”

The visages of the three other Ravenclaws plus Alexandra currently gathered with the older teenage boy must have shown enough of their feelings for Filius Flitwick, because his voice was apologetic but true. The announcement just delivered was not a joke.

“There is no mistake, Mr. Davies. As the sign-ups for House Ravenclaw have attracted a grand total of five aspirant Champions and House Slytherin’s have nine, the Headmaster has decided to hold your first preliminary trial on this Saturday and Sunday respectively. The location of this event will be the Black Lake.”

Alexandra frowned before letting a large sigh escape her lips. Why was it that every time she felt tempted to forget Albus Dumbledore and let the deluded fool die of old age, the man had to give her reasons to hate him even more?

The motive to organise the first preliminary at this date could be justified by their limited numbers, the reality of unneeded logistics, and the urgency to prove to the world Hogwarts had competitors that would not stop at the first danger to win the European Magical Tournament.

On the other hand, sending aspirant Champions out on the Black Lake in the middle of winter – which for the record was frozen for many, many miles – was a guarantee of a miserable spectacle and poor competition at its finest. The five Ravenclaws had already decided the order of their rankings, but together they could do some exhilarating performances for the public and the judges. All of those good intentions were going to go literally by the bottom of the lake if they were forced to compete in freezing temperatures while two Houses stayed safely inside the walls of the castle.

Cho Chang was the first to react to their Professor’s speech, and if her tone had been acid, Professor Dumbledore would be some liquefied puddle after the first words.

“The Headmaster is violating every equality principle with this farce of a preliminary. All the sign-ups are done, the potential Champions have put forward their names, and since there is no stand or outrageous infrastructure around the Black Lake, the four Houses could have their four preliminaries on the same week-end.”

“I agree with Cho, Professor.” Alexandra said, this last manipulation hitting her nerves more than usual. “Unless the Headmaster has different preliminaries for each House, by the time the week-end is over, all the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff aspirants will be busy learning methods to succeed in this preliminary trial without raising a finger. And I’m ready to bet they will have the date in the middle of spring with hundreds of spectators to prove how great the Lions are when duty calls.”

It would, obviously, boost Gryffindor and Hufflepuff’s standing in the eyes of the British public while relegating Ravenclaw and Slytherin to the shadows. This was a very political and short-sighted move. It was truly worthy of Albus Dumbledore.

“I am, alas, powerless to change the date, Ms. Potter.”

“We know Professor,” Morag intervened. “But we want to openly voice our protestations at a childish move which is only going to divide the school further into three or four factions. The Founders would have wanted a show of unity from us. As it stands, we are going to present the very opposite on the eve of the Tournament.”

The gloom in the Charms Professor’s eyes told the Ravenclaw students that their arguments had already been thought over in the head of the retired Duellist.

“I will make sure your protestations are heard.” If his voice was any indication, Professor Flitwick would add some of his own to theirs. “Let’s go back to the subject of the preliminaries. Do you think your group will be ready for Saturday?”

The four Ravenclaw girls and the lone boy all made large negative shakes of the head.

“We won’t be, Professor,” the Basilisk-Slayer chose to reply to her Head of House. “I fear we will need to...improvise.”

“Thankfully,” Roger Davies finished, “we will be lucky enough to have a tenth of the spectators we usually have for a Quidditch game...”

**6 January 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Albus fell upon the Headmaster’s seat with a small sound of relief. At long last, the seven-hour-long session of the Wizengamot was over. If he heard ‘cauldron’s thickness regulations’ for the next five days, the Chief Warlock swore he was going to transform someone into a sheep or a pig. It shouldn’t be humanly possible, but the Lords, the Ladies and the various Ministry officials had triumphantly achieved an impressive feat: make one of the more boring topics in existence even more annoying and sleep-inducing.

One day, someone was going to die of boredom during these sessions. Albus Dumbledore could only hope it wasn’t going to be him.

The next hour was one of relaxation. Caressing Fawkes, he checked several of the most powerful Hogwarts wards, exchanged a few conversations with the portraits of past Headmasters, and ate a warm meal brought directly to his office by the House Elves from the kitchens.

But the hardship of his jobs soon brought him back to the parchment-work. There were documents to sign from the Wizengamot, supply demands from two-thirds of the Professors with Severus taking the lion’s share – excuse the pun - in new cauldrons and ingredients, and promises and preparations to order for the Order of the Phoenix and his allies.

As a consequence, the evening had long passed into night when the Headmaster-Alchemist had the opportunity to think about the matter of the European Magical Tournament and its preliminaries.

“How could it go wrong so fast, Fawkes?” the Headmaster asked the magnificent Phoenix three feet away from his desk. Unfortunately, the brilliant and noble magical animal was not able to dissert on the intricacies of international Tournaments and the political intricacies going on with it. It was probably for the best...the question was rhetorical anyway.

Since no one was there – save Fawkes and the portraits, all sworn to keep anything he spoke here secret – Albus Dumbledore authorised himself a grimace he would never show in public. This damned Venetian Succubus had put him in a very uncomfortable position on the international stage. The Chief Warlock had expected, no he had taken for granted, he could be at least honest with himself on that point, to be one of the judges for the greatest interschool Tournament of this century.

To learn he wouldn’t be one at the Winter Ball had been a shock that had caught him by surprise. If it had been a blatant partisan move like nominating five Italian judges as the sole referees for this competition, Albus wouldn’t have needed long to find a parade. The threat of withdrawing from the Tournament would have been agitated by Hogwarts and likely followed by Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. But Angelica Sforza had been clever. Far more clever than a Dark Creature like her should be. The ten judges would all be ICW appointed representatives and neutral experts in their own fields, and none would have familial ties or economic motives to support a Venetian, a French, or a German Champion. The decision was draped in the pretence of fairness, equality and impartiality.

Obviously behind the scenes it would be anything but. Karkaroff had protested for the form. Madam Maxime and he hadn’t bothered. The public would see an open contest. Albus was sure it was going to be the complete opposite. Sforza the Succubus had already decided who was going to win this Tournament. What sort of blackmail and influence this monster had over each judge, he didn’t know, but it clearly wouldn’t be to his advantage.

“And the Succubus tries in the shadows to gain even more of an upper hand...”

Fortunately, the Dark’s move to make themselves the judges of the Hogwarts Preliminaries had been stopped in time. He shuddered at the idea of Dark Wizards and Witches roaming without supervision in the corridors of his school.

No, the four events organised at Hogwarts would have judges he had vetted himself. The three permanent ones would be Ludovic Bagman, Bartemius Crouch, and himself. The fourth one would be an ICW representative who had NEWT-level experience in whatever field the task demanded from the aspirant Champions. For the first on the Black Lake this week-end, this seat was going to be held by Karel van Dusseldorp, a long-time ally of the Netherlands Union Party.

It was a meagre satisfaction, at the measure of this tiny victory.

Reading the names of the Ravenclaws and the Slytherins who had signed-up for the events from January to May 1994 did not cheer him up.

“Cho Chang, Roger Davies, Hermione Granger, Morag MacDougal, Alexandra Potter...”

This was not a competition list, this was just a plebiscite for the Basilisk-Slayer of Ravenclaw. Albus scowled...again. In his role of Headmaster, he was really going to have some words with Filius before Saturday. The Head of Ravenclaw was giving too much leeway to James Potter’s Dark spawn.

There was an urge in his head to go directly to Ravenclaw Tower and force the murderous bitch hiding behind a young girl’s visage to admit she had threatened the Ravens to let her win the Champion title of her House by default. But the same facts that had prevented him from doing so before Christmas were still valid. If he removed the ‘Exiled Queen’ – what a ridiculous and pretentious nickname – Albus would have to find three replacements, as the MacDougal Heiress and the Granger know-it-all would refuse to participate without their leader.

And as galling as it was to admit, the murderess of the Chamber of Secrets and the Battle of Hogsmeade was likely the only Ravenclaw to have a chance of not being instantly massacred by Lyudmila Romanov.

No, he would have to let things stand. And while it was unlikely, it was possible Roger Davies would manage to beat the third-year murderess in the Hogwarts Preliminaries. The Ravenclaw boy was not an embodiment of the Light like Cedric Diggory of Hufflepuff, but he was largely preferable to a potential black witch.

At least he knew the names of the five Ravenclaws who would travel with him to the Scuola Regina in October 1994. The Chief Warlock did not have the same certainty for Slytherin...save that the final result was going to be worse than Ravenclaw.

“Lucian Bole, Vincent Crabbe, Tracey Davis, Peregrine Derrick, Gregory Goyle, Graham Montague, Theodore Nott, Cassius Warrington and Blaise Zabini...”

The simple act of reading these names was enough to give him a powerful headache. For a few seconds, he had hoped this was Severus’ attempt at playing a joke on him when the Potions Master had handed him the list.

But it wasn’t.

The urge to get rid of the Ravenclaw aspirants was powerful but he could contain it in his chest. It would be incredibly difficult to remove the last spawn of House Potter, the popular Chinese girl, and the Prefect-Captain of Ravenclaw. But the Slytherins...it was not an urge, it was an inferno made of Phoenix fire in his heart.

Severus had told him it was in all likelihood an attempt from the most moderate Slytherin students to banish their extreme housemates for a year, but this was a disaster nonetheless. Warrington and Montague had proved their families’ affiliations to the Death Eaters were not and had never been based on vague Imperius incantations during the Chamber of Secrets’ incident. Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle were Dark Houses which had adopted the same blood-purist philosophies. Zabini of course was the only son of the Black Widow. And Bole and Derrick were the last descendants of some very dangerous mercenaries proposing their services to the highest bidder across the European continent and beyond – and in the last war it had included the followers of Voldemort. The sole candidate who was not related to a Death Eater or a mass murderer was Tracey Davis, and she was more an anomaly than the rule in the den of vipers.

“Too few aspirants and all we have for House Slytherin are the worst of the purists. Salazar Slytherin must be rolling in his grave...”

Albus wasn’t omniscient and had never pretended to be. But he knew enough names among the student body to grit his teeth at the ‘skills’ of the ‘candidates’. According to Severus, the young Crabbe and Goyle were promised to a bright future as long as it didn’t involve using their brains for something more complicated than lacing their shoes and eating their meals. The two third-years who had apparently decided to serve as bodyguards to young Theodore Nott this year were already failing half of their classes. It would be a miracle if they passed two or three OWLs. Combined.

Lucian Bole and Peregrine Derrick had passed said exams last year. They had both failed Transfiguration, Herbology, DADA, Runes, and Charms, however. The grades of Cassius Warrington so far could be qualified somewhere between ‘sub-par’ and ‘low-average’. Graham Montague had the record of exploding cauldrons in Potions and an abysmally-low performance in Transfiguration. Theodore Nott was routinely failing achieving ‘Dreadful’ in History, Astronomy, Herbology, DADA, and Transfiguration.

Blaise Zabini and Tracey Davis, especially the latter, were likely the best students of the lot...and it was not raising the threshold very much.

“If it was up to me,” the Headmaster of Hogwarts grumbled, “I would evict these idiots and replace them with Gryffindors...we have too many Lions for five places.”

Unlike Ravenclaw and Slytherin, the sign-ups of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor had been extremely popular. Too popular, perhaps. Figuring how in the name of Merlin he was going to control a trial where twenty-seven candidates competed at the same time was a monumental chore. And the Badgers had twenty-five aspirants of their own, so the same challenge had for all intent and purpose to be done twice for the masses.

“Why did I think it was a good idea to organise this Tournament in the first place, Fawkes?” Albus asked his beloved Phoenix. The thrills were heart-warming, but provided no answer. And the Chief Warlock, Defeater of Grindelwald, and Headmaster of Hogwarts returned to the last parchment he had to answer to before taking a few hours of rest.

“How simpler life would be if Hogwarts only welcomed Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs...”

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

“For someone who has an inner animal living in a polar environment, your lack of resistance against the cold is really curious, Hermione...”

“Shut up...” grumbled the strange ball of cloaks and furs where somewhere inside hid Hermione Granger.

“Oh and it’s going to be really difficult seeing anything with those clothes,” Alexandra said, ignoring the previous remark. “And it will be harder to do anything, like participating in a preliminary trial, with all this weight on your shoulders and your back.”

Granted she was in winter clothes too, but unlike her bushy-haired friend, Alexandra was regularly abusing the Warming Charm every ten minutes. The furred robes on her were still heavier than she felt comfortable with for an exhausting activity, but it would have to do. Hopefully, if she had correctly interpreted Flitwick’s insinuations, the task would be over in minutes.

“I don’t think she really intend to do more than show up and watch you participate in the trial, Alexandra,” Susan intervened in an amused voice.

Alexandra gave a smile to her girlfriend, before considering the words. Well, it was true Hermione didn’t really need to do anything per se. The dentist’ daughter was going to be the fourth substitute, and in the absence of competition, she could afford a zero or two. It was just that Hermione Granger getting bad marks on purpose was the next best thing the world had to an imminent apocalypse...

“I can’t blame her,” the Potter Heiress cast a new Warming Charm before holding a bowl burning in green flames against her body.

Small number of participants or not, organising a trial in these conditions was a stupidity beyond words. Maybe it was Dumbledore’s way of telling them he as Headmaster wished for other Ravenclaws to be chosen as Champions of Hogwarts. If so, he would be sorely disappointed: the reinforcements of aspirant Champions were not exactly hurrying to knock at the gates.

One thing was sure, the weather and the rest of the climatic conditions were typical of the Scottish winters at Hogwarts. The sky was a dark grey with no sun. The wind was a biting gale coming from the north-east. The lake was frozen everywhere her transformed eyes could see, which was sadly not as far she wished. Despite the fact that there was over an hour left before noon, the visibility was low and the Lake looked more like the antechamber of Niflheim than the pleasant swimming location the students used in the days of May before returning home.

Could they walk on the entire length of the Black Lake without breaking the ice? It was far from certain, and Alexandra had no wish to answer the question via a practical experiment.

Could they offer a spectacle worthy of the name to the thirty-plus Ravenclaws and the twenty-plus Slytherins who had altruistically - or not in the case of the Slytherins - decided to leave the castle after breakfast to watch the first round of the trials? No.

This was already a joke which had stopped being funny the moment it was uttered, and just as the five ‘potential Champions’ lined up on the shore of the Black Lake, the spectators behind them, it turned worse.

A man in bright yellow Quidditch robes stormed from out of the tents, and by his excited expression, the green-eyed Ravenclaw realised she had one of the ‘great minds’ of this preliminary in front of her.

“Who is this Ministry idiot?” the Potter Heiress murmured to Morag on her left.

“Ludovic Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports,” the MacDougal witch replied in a whisper. “He played as a Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps and was selected for three years as a titular player of the English National Team. I think he retired fourteen or fifteen years ago.”

“It shows,” Alexandra commented.

Years ago, Bagman must have been a real athlete and a terror for the opposing team. But such times were long gone. The Departmental Head was not as obese as Vernon Dursley – thank the Valar for that - but he was also clearly out of shape and really on his way to being larger than he was tall. And the Wimbourne Quidditch robes the man had decided to wear today were emphasizing this corpulence problem.

That the Ministry had decided to name someone like him as the closest thing Magical Britain had to a Minister of Sports was saying something about the Fudge administration, and it was not positive.

“Good! Good! The Preliminary Champions are here!” Ludovic Bagman clapped in his hands like the scene of five students in winter clothes and an audience of fifty people was extraordinary.

“Are you ready to dazzle the crowd with your magical prowess?” The former Beater spoke with so much conviction Alexandra glanced back at the small audience behind their line of five. And no, it had not changed since the last time the green-eyed witch was looking at them. There still were only thirty-plus Ravenclaws, twenty-plus Slytherins, five to ten Hufflepuffs and four or five Gryffindors. Since they were Ministry personnel coming out of the tents behind Bagman and a few adult observers, maybe they were about to reach one hundred people put together.

Alexandra wasn’t going to call this gathering a ‘large crowd’ anytime soon.

“The goal of this preliminary event is to test your knowledge of Charms, Runes, and resistance to harsh weather!” Ludovic Bagman continued cheerfully like they were inside a Quidditch stadium about to be applauded by tens of thousands of wizards and witches. “House Ravenclaw is noted for its wisdom and knowledge, and we offer you the opportunity to prove it today!”

Yes, yes. Alexandra repressed a chuckle. What were they going to test with the Slytherins tomorrow? The non-existent cunning of Crabbe and Goyle was already known to everyone at Hogwarts save maybe a few deaf House Elves...

By then, the Departmental Head of Sports had been joined by the other judges. These ones, the Potter Heiress didn’t need Morag to reveal the names of. Their Headmaster was there, predictably. The austere and grim wizard on his right was the infamous Bartemius Crouch Senior, Head of the Department of International Cooperation. And the last one was Karel van Dusseldorp, a Dutch ICW representative who was famous – or infamous depending on your point of view – for his support and creation of arch-conservative Light laws.

Apparently, the bigot’s fingerprints could be found everywhere on the last anti-Succubus, anti-Lamia, and in general anti ‘Dark Creatures’ laws voted on the early 1980s in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Bavaria.

To say she did not have a good opinion of this man was like saying the Black Lake was a bit non-navigable this morning. It didn’t help that physically, the Dutch wizard was an old and stunted figure. If he had not celebrated his one hundredth birthday, the raven-haired girl would be very surprised.

“The goal of this task is simple,” Bartemius Crouch began in a harsh voice where no positive feelings of any sort could be found, interrupting the nonsensical tirade of Ludovic Bagman. “Five flags have been emplaced in the middle of the Black Lake. One has your name on it. Find it, unlock the runic puzzle that traps it in the ice, and come back here as fast as you can. You have one hour to accomplish this task. You will compete together. The time will be taken into account for your final grade.”

“The ice has been considerably expanded and strengthened to handle your combined weight.” Albus Dumbledore told them in a tone that was both grandfatherly and reassuring. “Naturally, trying to break it to eliminate an opponent is strictly forbidden and will result in your immediate elimination from the preliminaries. Heirlooms and weapons are not authorised. You will have only your wand and your wits to successfully pass this challenge. Any questions?”

There were none, and Alexandra sighed in relief. It was...well, it could have been worse. And there was no reason why her plan A wasn’t going to work.

Bagman must have thought he had stayed silent for far too long, because he touched his throat with the tip of his wand and muttered the Sound-Amplifying Charm.

The outcome was...thunderous.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN...WELCOME! WELCOME TO THE FIRST TRIAL OF THE HOGWARTS SELECTIONS FOR THE EUROPEAN MAGICAL TOURNAMENT!”

The cheers and acclamations were almost non-existent in return.

“THIS CHALLENGE OF THE BLACK LAKE WILL SEE FIVE BRILLIANT STUDENTS OF HOGWARTS COMPETE! THEY ARE THE CHAMPIONS OF ROWENA RAVENCLAW! FROM LEFT TO RIGHT! ACCLAIM WITH ME! HERMIONE GRANGER!”

If the retired Quidditch player had hoped this would incite Hermione to remove a few furs from her head or body, he must have been sorely disappointed.

“MORAG MACDOUGAL! ALEXANDRA POTTER! CHO CHANG! ANNNDDD ROOOOOGEERRR DAAAVVIIEES!”

The noises made by the spectators may have woken up a squirrel.

“3...2...1...IT BEGINS!”

Roger, Morag? and Cho began to walk at a fast pace towards the shores. Alexandra didn’t bother. For once, she was going to make an exception to her principles. She was going to be lazy.

“ACCIO NIMBUS 2000!” the third-year Ravenclaw shouted, more for the benefit of the audience than any need to.

“This is too far, even for you,” Hermione grumbled under her winter furs. “The energy required for the Summoning Charm...”

“...is exponential past half a mile according to the works of several German and French wizards, yes.” Alexandra allowed herself a smirk, as the small drain on her magic echoed and her hydra ‘instincts’ began to wake up despite the cold atmosphere. “But who cares about what some old geezers say?”

She, Alexandra Potter, had raised an ancient Dreadnought of the Imperial German Navy from the sea bed of Scapa Flow with an ancient Roman Levitation incantation, a rune circle, and the help of the first hydra head’s power coursing through her veins.

Summoning her Quidditch broom from two miles away was no big deal anymore...and besides, the notion of ‘impossible’ was taken far too seriously by the wizards and witches of Britain.

Like a spear out of the blue, the Nimbus 2000 shredded the fog and Alexandra had only to open her hand and jump. The ex-Beater serving as commentator was shouting something but one impulsion and she was soaring in the air.

“Whatever obstacles are dispersed over the ice, they are useless. UP RAVENCLAW!”

**9 January 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

When Geoffrey Hooper stopped speaking, Neville was not ashamed to say he had his mouth wide open in disbelief.

The consolation was that he was far from the only one. In fact, most of the Gryffindor Common Room was in a state of shock.

“Geoffrey...” Cormac McLaggen said with a tone usually reserved best for those considered utterly barmy or having mental problems. “My ears are failing me, because I thought you just said the Exiled Queen has summoned a Quidditch broom from Ravenclaw Tower to the starting line on the shores of the Black Lake.”

“I did. It’s a Nimbus 2000,” Geoffrey answered stonily.

“Well, that’s bloodily impossible!” Cormac retorted with a contemptuous expression. “There must be, what two miles between the castle and the location the tents have been emplaced? No student can summon a teacup over such a distance with precision! McGonagall, Flitwick, Snape, and of course Professor Dumbledore can, but they’re our Professors. And really, a Quidditch broom is not a teacup. It is a heavily enchanted object and there are several charms imbued in the wood which makes it more resistant to Accio and common Charms which can disrupt a broom event.”

“Yes, this is impossible,” and Neville tried very hard not to groan or manifest his contrariety because the voice was Leo Black. “For a normal student, it is. But we’re speaking about a Dark Witch, a mistress of the Dark Arts...”

“Oh shut up, Black,” Katie Bell cut him off in the middle of his sentence, disdain clear on her face. “I am a fourth-year and we were taught Accio a couple of months ago. This is not a forbidden spell, and mental strength and training have a great importance in its mastery according to Professor Flitwick. Potter must have asked for a few tutoring lessons with her Head of House.”

Neville had to admit it was a far more believable explanation than the one before it...but given the scowls of McLaggen and his group, he could tell they didn’t try to examine it seriously for even a single second.

“We saw Potter practise it on pillows a few months ago,” Fred Weasley – or was it George? – said while playing with a gelatinous blue substance.

“She was performing it better than us,” his twin added an instant later.

“Damn,” Kenneth Towler, fifth-year Gryffindor and one of the many Lions who had signed-up for the preliminaries, swore. “Now I understand better why the Ravenclaws haven’t bothered sending ten or fifteen candidates. They think it isn’t worth the effort.”

“Surely not...”

Geoffrey Hooper smiled at the protestation of Rachael Codnor.

“Potter demolished the preliminary by summoning her broom, unlocking the Runes’ puzzle, and reaching the finish line in three minutes and twenty-five seconds. She earned ninety-nine points out of one hundred. If you think you can do better and beat her record Rachael, you’re welcome to try. I’m sure we can all go watch your try-out tomorrow morning.”

“Okay, I can’t,” the brown-haired girl answered reluctantly.

“I don’t know why everyone is looking so surprised,” Carl Hopkins phlegmatically commented. “The Twins aside, everyone seems to have forgotten April of last year. Did you forget the carcass of that gigantic snake near the Black Lake? The Exiled Queen challenged a Basilisk in single combat and won during her second year at Hogwarts. Unless she slept on her laurels, Potter was always going to become more powerful and leave us in the dust. When it comes down to it, she just decided to learn the Summoning Charm one year before we do.”

“Which just proves she’s a Dark Witch,” Cormac McLaggen insisted. “Fourth-year spells are taxing, a third-year shouldn’t be able to cast them and remain conscious minutes after!”

“That is not a rule,” Alicia Spinnet countered immediately. “There are always students more powerful than the norm, and Potter has never hidden that she’s regularly throwing around war spells when her life is in danger. If she is already close to Lady-level in power, all she has to care about is the specifics of the incantation, not the magic output she will spend to cast one Summoning Charm.”

This, evidently, was the wrong thing to say.

“Dumbledore himself was not that powerful at that age! Her power is simply unnatural and the result of forbidden rituals!”

Katie Bell rolled her eyes in an exaggerated manner.

“You’re just jealous, McLaggen.”

The Common Room erupted in a storm of shouts, insults, and accusations. All the girls who had signed-up for the preliminaries – and many who hadn’t – were supporting the three Chasers of House Gryffindor and the opinion that a girl could largely beat the precocity achievements of Headmaster Dumbledore.

On the other side, Cormac McLaggen, and some of the older students like Pete Balsall...and much younger ones like Leo and Ron.

The future Lord of House Longbottom was...worried about them. The suspension had lasted less time than it was supposed to, but for him it was like it had been years. They had changed so much...or was it him who had changed?

There was a point he couldn’t argue against. No matter who had used their trio to spread chaos inside Hogwarts – because the coincidence was a bit too big: Ron under Compulsions triggered the very day the Dementors attacked in mass a Quidditch game? – the hatred his two...friends...felt for Alexandra Potter was rooted and unquenchable.

And it worried Neville. It was misguided, because Potter wasn’t the culprit, just another pawn in the disaster. It was useless, because if the last months and this preliminary had proved something, it was that Leo and Ron together had not a snowball’s chance in a pit of lava of surviving if the Exiled Queen decided to get serious. And it was politically suicidal, because the more they pushed, the more they angered House Ravenclaw as a whole.

For all the promises from McLaggen, the New Marauder knew perfectly well how badly the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw ties had suffered since October. Edgecombe could promise everything she wanted, she had maybe five or six boys and girls with her. The rest would stand with Potter, Davies, and Chang unless they did something extremely stupid in public.

The Boy-Who-Lived rose from his seat and walked to the couch where Geoffrey Hooper and Carl Hopkins were drinking pumpkin juice.

“Fishing for information about the Exiled Queen, Neville?”

“No, not really,” the black-haired boy admitted. “However she did it, I can’t imitate Potter and master the Summoning Charm. If it fails, I will be weak, exhausted, and my failure in the trial will be a certainty. No, I’m more interested in the methods the four other Ravenclaws used to grab their flags.”

George Hooper nodded.

“Yes, I suppose I didn’t get to that part. Granger didn’t get hers. She made an attempt from the shore with some Accios and a combination of blue flames and animated ice, but it failed. She got ten points for her efforts. MacDougal...I think it was a ward-Charm kept secret by her family. It allowed her feet to sort of merge with the ice and she could run upon the Black Lake without gliding. Unfortunately for her, she sucks at puzzles and took fifteen minutes to solve it. She finished third in fifty-two minutes and earned forty points.”

“That’s...that’s not exactly what I wanted to hear.”

It was encouraging honestly that out of the three third-year Ravenclaw girls, two had successfully completed the trial. And maybe Hermione Granger could have too. Her attempts looked suspiciously like she had given up before the start of the preliminary.

But on the bad side, their methods weren’t ones he could copy or adapt to his own skill. Family Magic was Family Magic, and House MacDougal was unlikely to reveal its secrets to an ally, so a non-ally...

“Yeah, I suppose not.” Hooper raised his drink. “Chang was inventive. She transfigured rocks, snow, and ice into a blue pair of ice skates and raced across the Black Lake. The Dutch judge was particularly happy and congratulated her at the end. They gave her sixty-three points for a time of thirty- eight minutes. And Roger Davies outright transfigured ice and water into some ice conjured animal that he rode upon. He finished second in thirty-four minutes with sixty-nine points.”

Merlin’s socks, the Ravenclaws were smart, inventive...and skilled. He had not done any ice skating in his life, but he had seen the ‘shoes’ in question, and to transfigure and charm your surroundings into a shoe and a very sharp blade to skate over the ice was a work of precision. And what Roger Davies had done...he lacked the raw power, same as the Accio Charm.

It was too bad, because as the Exiled Queen had proved, if you had a flying broom, this task could be done in less than five minutes.

“Potter has won, then. She will be the Ravenclaw Champion for sure.”

“The real question,” said Hopkins while refilling his glass with a liquid which smelled suspiciously like Butterbeer, “is if she will establish a top record over three hundred and ninety points in four trials or not...”

**10 January 1994, Somewhere in Scotland**

“You showed me the photos, but they didn’t do it justice...”

Alexandra smiled at Morag’s expression of disbelief while they made their promenade on the bridge of *SMS Markgraf*, former battleship of the Imperial German Navy.

“I told you the non-magical engineers could build big.”

“Yes, you did,” agreed her red-haired friend. “And you also said there are bigger warships sailing around now.”

“There are.” Alexandra was not a naval expert, but even she had heard of the Unites States’ supercarriers and how they had taken the role of ‘most powerful and largest hulls of the fleet’ from the battleships.

Of course, that was where *normal* battleships were concerned...

“Do you think it will be battle-worthy in time?” the MacDougal Heiress asked her.

Alexandra grimaced.

“That depends on your definition of ‘in time’. If you mean anytime this year, it’s best to forget it. Magic and the goblin ‘outliers’ Grimjaw contacted will do a lot, but there’s a lot of things to work on if we want to make this Dreadnought seaworthy again.”

Mending Charms and the full array of restoring incantations available to a witch could only do so much. *SMS Markgraf* had been scuttled in 1919 and while cold water had preserved things somewhat, it had not been good for the hull and the gun batteries at all.

“Fred, George, and I will come regularly to add our efforts to the goblin team. I think we will also be improving the restoration program this summer...but with the Tournament for fourth year, it’s unlikely we will have a seaworthy battleship until June 1995.”

The big twelve-inch guns would be functional long before that, but unfortunately commissioning – or re-commissioning in this case – a warship was not limited to the act of firing its cannons in anger. They needed something that could sail from Scotland to New York without magical help, and at the moment this was impossible. Towing *Markgraf* from Scapa Flow to this empty loch in the middle of nowhere had been a monumental chore, even with goblin help and the most powerful Notice-me-not Charms they could cast.

“Will we be able to keep it secret? We are not far from Hogwarts...”

Alexandra raised an eyebrow.

“’Not far’ is really relative, Morag. We are still forty-plus miles away from the castle, and the outer wards and sensors of our school have never reached that far at any point historically. From the non-magical side, it will be...extremely difficult to discover our German prize. This loch and the neighbouring lands were once a magical preserve of House Gaunt, and the aversion runes those nut jobs have carved into the cliffs and the tall promontory are still active today. Maps and technological methods of tracking are useless in the region.”

“Fine, but that still leaves the magical investigators.”

“True. I am forced to admit we rely a lot on the Ministry’s blindness and Dumbledore’s arrogance. But for one year or two, this loch and the improvised shipyard the goblins and we will build here can be kept secret. House Gaunt is extinct and long forgotten, and if a Wizengamot House had wanted to use this property, they would have done it decades ago.”

Before choosing this location, the Hydra Animagus had thought many nights on the holes in security, and while the measures she had thought about were far from perfect, they should be sufficient for their purposes.

“All our friends know the basic goals of Operation Belfalas, but only Fred and George plus us know the precise coordinates. Neither Lady Zabini nor Grimjaw do.” Those two participated financially by diverting some steel and resources this way, but did not have the information on where *SMS Markgraf* was repaired. “I am sufficiently advanced in the Animagus transformation for a Legilimens to be unable to read my mind, and Fred and George have their own pseudo-Occlumency training. So once you are an Animagus too, nobody will be able to find it that way. As for our other enemies...we will have to hope they will be unable to pierce our veil of secrecy. We don’t have the resources to transform this loch into the equivalent of a massive U-Boat World War 2-style base.”

Morag nodded thoughtfully, before jumping as a golden streak materialised before her...only to jump directly into Alexandra’s arms when the baby dragon realised he had rushed towards the wrong girl.

“Mommy! Mommy! I’m hungry!”

Morag, traitorous friend that she was, burst into laughter and almost rolled over the deck’s edge in amusement.

“Come on Fingolfin, there must be a rabbit and a lot of milk waiting for you in the kitchens...”

If Albus Dumbledore had any idea how many of his laws she had broken here, the Headmaster of Hogwarts was going to have a heart attack. This thought made her smile as Morag continued to giggle like a mad harpy and Fingolfin demanded more caresses.

**Author’s note**: One preliminary won for Alexandra, three more to go. And now I leave to your thoughts how the Gryffindor would react knowing Alexandra raised a Dreadnought from the seabed alone a few days ago...

Happy New Year to all and hope you have a great year of fan-fiction!

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