**Chapter 69**

**Fire and Accusations**

**19 February 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Sometimes Ginny was jealous of the Exiled.

It was not a problem of power. Between her magical core and the blood rituals she had passed through courtesy of the bastard Dark Lord, the girl currently recognised by magic as Scylla Yaxley knew she was potentially the second most powerful student of Hogwarts.

It was not a power of skill or knowledge. Ginny had plenty of both, thank you very much. It was not an issue of House Points or broom-riding talent. The still-Gryffindor witch won plenty of the former every week, and she was pretty sure she could beat any Ravenclaw on the latter.

No, her motives for jealousy were far more...academic and school-oriented. How by Merlin’s socks did Alexandra Potter and her friends manage to study for hours dusty old books and not get bored to death?

Ginny could make efforts, but reading five hundred pages of small commentaries on the best uses of Futhark without interruption was not something she could endure without going crazy. Yet the green-eyed girl seated on a chair in the Hogwarts Library Runes’ section had done exactly this all this afternoon.

For her, it was a complete mystery how Alexandra Potter could shift from ‘bookworm’ to the terrifying girl who had left her opposition in the dust during the Temple of Plants’ preliminary.

“Sit down red-haired girl, you’re blocking much of the afternoon’s light,” the Basilisk-Slayer murmured.

“Ah, sorry,” Ginny sat down.

For a couple of minutes the third-year Ravenclaw continued to read in silence her book, like her full attention was on it. It was evidently false, as one quill was scratching and making a lot of comments in red ink on an old parchment on the other end of the table.

“An essay which failed Hermione Granger’s exacting standards?”

“One of the contingency plans we wanted to protect Hogwarts with,” corrected the Potter Heiress in a slow and measured voice. “I made a lot of them with Morag to help me, but since the beginning of the year we have been forced to cancel a lot of them.”

One of the abandoned parchments on the table read *Contingency Ent*.

“It’s the Exchequer’s exploits which forced you to abandon this contingency?”

“No, it’s my actions,” the older girl answered with a slight smirk. “Contingency Ent was supposed to provide a first line of defence for Hogwarts by placing several dangerous plants at key chokepoints to slow down a potential invader.”

Ginny was not the fastest mind in the world, but even she could see where it was going.

“Based on the second preliminary, you don’t think even dangerous plants can slow down any Dark Wizard long enough to provide the time to evacuate.”

Alexandra Potter shrugged, her eyes still fixed on her book.

“The flowers, trees and other plants bought by Professor Sprout were more dangerous than the stuff we wanted to use against the Inferi and the minions of darkness. Given how easy it was for me to break through against the defences of the Temple of Plants, I think we must take for granted a ruthless Knight of the Exchequer will need mere seconds to burn everything.”

Ginny wasn’t about to disagree. The Basilisk-Slayer had decimated plants and opposition like it was a morning’s stroll. In less than a minute, the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had fallen far, far behind.

It had taken ten minutes to the Ravenclaw Champion to win the preliminary, and as far as Ginny or the school knew, Alexandra Potter had not suffered a single scratch or exhausted herself. Since she was a third-year, no matter how talented, Ginny was trying to not ask herself how Morgana La Fay or any of the Lord and Lady-level Dark Wizards under her authority would have handled this Trial.

“In fact, we have been forced more or less to cancel all our ‘offensive contingencies’,” the black-haired Champion she was now pledged to admitted bluntly. “Operation Belfalas is the only one I have activated. Contingencies Helm, Ent, and Dagorlad were good in theory, but in practise their efficiency is minimal compared to the costs in time and money we would have to spend for the subterfuges and the maintenance.”

There was more scratching and red ink poured on the nearby parchment.

“The passive Contingencies like Alexandria, Lost Ark and Rune are still operating normally. If our enemies don’t attack the castle before the end of fourth year, we should be able to save most of the lore and valuable knowledge inside Hogwarts’ walls even if the school falls to the Exchequer.”

Ginny nodded. To be honest, she didn’t want Hogwarts to fall. Dumbledore might be an old man who should have retired a decade ago before dirtying the reputation of the school, but the thousand-year old castle had been a home and a refuge for uncountable generations of young wizards and witches. Being transformed into the equivalent of a pureblood Princess had not changed her opinion on the subject.

On the other hand, there was no denying that Hogsmeade hadn’t been severely damaged by the battle between one of the Exchequer Knights and a Light Champion. If more Exchequer Knights returned, only Dumbledore would be able to handle his own in duel for a few minutes. Hordes of Inferi and Dark Creatures would be able to ravage the grounds at their leisure while the Headmaster was busy.

So yes, copying as much information, lore, traditions and school surplus while there was still time was a wise strategy worthy of Rowena Ravenclaw. It didn’t mean she had to like it, however.

“Err...I’m glad to hear it. On a totally unrelated subject, have you thought about my little lineage problem?”

Time was running out, and she really, really didn’t want to announce to her family – save Fred and George of course, who were already in the know – that the excursion in Egypt had resulted in her abandoning the last ties of Weasley inheritance in her and to gain the full Yaxley legacy.

“Yes, I have,” the emotionless stare she received did tell her it was not going to be pleasant news. “I have thought about several scenarios, but all of them demand a lot of time...and we have not years or anything like that. And I can’t remove Lord Yaxley and his relatives from this world first. They are certainly pureblood bigots, but there isn’t any new evidence they were unrepentant Death Eaters. And one is the new Chief Auror, so if he disappears, there are going to be a lot of investigations and accusations thrown around.”

The green eyes watched her with mild compassion.

“Under the circumstances, we need more time before the secret is out.” The Potter Heiress’ expression grew more dangerous. “We need a Fidelius.”

**21 February 1994, Ministry of Magic, London, England**

When Alexandra had spoken with Scylla-Ginny two days ago how she didn’t want to kill more people than necessary due to the questions and investigations it would unavoidably raise, she hadn’t expected her words would be prophetic.

Fortunately, this time her enemies were just idiots.

Alexandra did her best to stay serious as they entered the courtroom the Department of International Magical Cooperation. It wouldn’t do to give the others persons in sight the idea she was thinking justice was useless...even if in the Wizarding World, ‘Imperius’ protestations, lack of Veritaserum and fabrication of evidence often made sure the trials’ outcome were known in advance. Dragon’s teeth, the Potter Heiress was sure Bellatrix Lestrange had committed enough crimes for a thousand years of prison and ten death sentences, but the British Ministry had made a farce of her trial and the ICW had no choice but to declare the entire procedure invalid. And since they had not given a trial to James Potter either, justice in the last decades appeared to have taken some lengthy holidays far, far away from the British Isles.

The seats reserved to the public were empty today. Her guardian had told her the Ministry didn’t wish for more bad publicity. As a result, there were less than ten adults in the courtroom with her, and only four truly counted.

The first had long dark wizard robes, neat grey hair and a narrow toothbrush moustache. His body and his visage were severity incarnate. Even if she had not seen his photo in the *Daily* *Prophet* during the last couple of years, Alexandra would not have been able to mistake Bartemius Crouch Senior, Director of the Magical International Cooperation, for anyone else. One look was more than enough to know the aged wizard would have been a very, very different leader than Fudge if he had been elected to the office of Minister of Magic. The impression he was surrounded with was one of harshness, inflexibility and lack of humour.

Crouch was perhaps a valuable man to enforce unpopular laws in war time, but certainly not someone who would ever be loved by the average witch or wizard.

The Director of the DMIC was flanked by three or four low-level secretaries and clerks today. He was the only person to have come with assistants, undoubtedly due to his Ministerial duties.

The second person was her guardian, of course. Stella Zabini had decided to wear a long yellow robe today, cut in a traditional fashion but somehow managing to present it like the latest winter collection. Compared to her shiny looks, Bartemius Crouch looked very much like a dark eminence.

The third was her lawyer, paid by House Zabini. His name was Vincenzo Deretti, and he was a dark-haired Italian-looking man in his thirties.

And the fourth was the reason she was here: Bastien de Rochefort, a distant cousin of the Male-Foi family. This wasn’t particular difficult to guess, as his hairs were the same pale blond as Lyre and his visage reminded her Draco Malfoy with a longer nose and some missing teeth.

It was the French emissary who spoke first, and he didn’t waste time going directly to the point.

“This Dark Witch has murdered many upstanding wizards and witches of the House of Male-Foi,” he proclaimed in an English sentence almost drowning under the French accent. “By the accords signed between our Ministries, I demand the immediate extradition of this dangerous killed on the French shores!”

The answer of her lawyer was energetic.

“I think your understanding of the existing diplomatic and other international accords are a bit flawed, Lord de Rochefort,” the Deretti lawyer replied. “To begin with, they require something called ‘proof’ in order to justify an extradition.”

This was in many ways why the green-eyed Ravenclaw hadn’t been in the least worried by the accusation of murder. Obviously, she had been enjoying the sun on a Brazilian island while Lyre killed most of her relatives. Alexandra had not set a foot on France since Lady Zabini had tortured her with this unending session of shopping before the Hofburg Ball. The Potter Heiress had an alibi, and the French Ministry had been unable to find the corpses of the Male-Foi family, and there were zero living witnesses save the House Elves of the *Manoir des Anges*.

“Why would my client desire the deaths of such upstanding pureblood as the members of the House of Male-Foi?”

“This Dark Witch killed the second cousin twice removed of Lord Arsène...”

“Objection!” Bartemius Crouch interrupted icily. “Arsène de Male-Foi was never elevated as the Lord of the Male-Foi family, and therefore can’t be referred as such.”

If the eyes of the blonde-haired French wizard had been granted the power of the Basilisk’s at this very moment, the humourless Director of International Cooperation would have been struck dead by the lethal glare.

“This Dark Witch killed the second cousin twice removed of Arsène de Male-Foi and the first cousin of Raphael de Male-Foi during the Battle of Hogsmeade!”

And just like that, most of her doubts about the wisdom of having let Lyre eliminate her relatives were instantly dispelled.

“And my client acted in legitimate defence against men sworn to the terrorist organisation known as the Army of Light,” Vincenzo said politely but firmly. “Assuredly there is no reason for my client to seek vengeance on the rest of the House of Male-Foi. I am sure the noble Arsène de Male-Foi and his family were not and have never been associated with this barbaric organisation of assassins and religious fanatics.”

It was extremely funny watching the French representative splutter and his expressions get angrier second after second. Seriously, what had the man thought by coming here? If he admitted House Potter had a motive to exterminate the second line of the Male-Foi line, Bastien de Rochefort would outright acknowledge his relations were associated with the Army of Light. If not, then clearly there was no reasonable motive for Alexandra to go after them.

“But you haven’t answered my question, Lord de Rochefort,” the Venetian lawyer continued. “My client has already communicated before this audience she was on holiday on a Brazilian property the day you think the Male-Foi family was murdered. Lady Zabini has confirmed her words. So I ask again: where is the evidence against my client?”

The man who was a very distant cousin of Lyre tried to say the contrary, naturally. He said he had witnesses – though he was unable to give names for ‘security reasons’. Bastien de Rochefort also tried to bluff by telling he had the full support of French Minister of Magic Delacour – only to be immediately countered by Bartemius Crouch.

Sentence after sentence, the famous French courtesy decided to leave the courtroom.

“You would fail to extradite a murderess?”

“Do the words ‘innocent until proven the contrary’ have any meaning to you?”

“House de Rochefort will never forget this!”

“You aren’t taking this affair calmly, my Lord. Are you sure you aren’t a member of the Army of Light?”

Five minutes later, Bartemius Crouch Senior, for all his patience and sense of justice, had enough of the bickering between the two foreign wizards.

“SILENCE!” the Director exclaimed. “Lord de Rochefort, unless you have serious evidence to present in public, your extradition pleas are rejected! This court and my Department have many affairs to hear and give a verdict upon. We don’t have time for demands which are based on nothing more than rumours and hearsay.”

“I think you are making a grave mistake, Director.”

Alexandra watched the man and silently thought that, if there was one huge error, it was Bastien de Rochefort who had made it by coming here today. Before today, Alexandra would have paid no attention to the man. Now she had his name and a good idea who were his true masters.

At the next sign of hostility, it was entirely possible a new French Lord was going to meet a tragic and mysterious end.

Judging by the loathing expression the arrogant blonde-haired man continued to give her, he had not understood that point.

“We will have to stay prudent during our next travels on French soil, I fear,” the Black Widow commented as they left the courtroom behind them.

“I suppose it was too much to hope they would stay quiet after the Battle of Hogsmeade.”

Her guardian had informed her after the end of the last preliminary of her father’s evasion from the asylum-hospital where he couldn’t hurt anyone. Now there was this accusation of murder. The Army of Light was becoming a very loud and real annoyance.

“At least with this Director, there’s no way they will be able to reopen the case on British soil.” Truthfully, Alexandra didn’t see how it would be otherwise in a French tribunal too unless it was completely rigged. No evidence, no witnesses, and nothing to show except vague accusations...

“Can I take the Floo to return to Hogwarts now?”

“No, there is another affair opened by the Department of Inheritance where your testimony is required,” the mother of Blaise had evidently guessed she had no idea what it was about, because she added immediately nine more words a few seconds later. “It’s about the will of Lady Cassiopeia Black.”

Alexandra frowned. What had the old – and very dead – crazy Black woman done?

**21 February 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

There were several reasons why the ‘after-preliminary evening meeting’ happened nine days after the task. The first, and most obvious, was that House Gryffindor had a very short number of first-class Omnioculars to record the two hours of action in the ‘Temple of Plants’ – more commonly known by its name of ‘Temple of Carnivorous Plants’.

More had been bought for the next preliminary trials, but when the four Houses had participated at the same, there had been ten of them in the dorms. As a result, it had taken most of the week for everyone to see the visual recordings of the school Amazonian course.

The second reason, and this one neither Neville nor the other Gryffindors had admitted in the Great Hall or their Common Room, was that they needed time to accept the defeat Ravenclaw had handed them in this preliminary.

And it was a defeat. The Ravens had taken the first place and every position from fourth to seventh. Gryffindor had done better than Hufflepuff; Angelina had finished second before Diggory, and three Lions including himself completed the top ten, but everyone had to confront the truth: there had been one winning House in this preliminary, and it wasn’t Gryffindor.

What made it worse was that in theory, it had been a task tailored-made for the House of chivalry and the brave. There had been little importance for homework or good grades as the plants of the ‘Temple’ were not studied in Herbology. No, the qualities required for this task were: powerful and precise spell-casting, running faster than your co-champions, and above all good endurance in casting fire spells.

And they had lost.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the floor is opened for the Grand Preliminary Debate,” Oliver Wood began as the designated referee for this evening. The Captain of the Quidditch team had been chosen for this role because he was completely neutral; it wasn’t Quidditch-related, and he couldn’t participate in the preliminaries since this year was the last he would stay at Hogwarts. “First subject is the performance of the Ravenclaw Champion.”

There were some insults and gritting of teeth from the couch where McLaggen and his friends were seated. To Neville’s disappointment, Ron and Leo were among this group.

“I don’t think there’s a lot to say about Potter,” Angelina chose to speak first. “She went through the obstacles so fast that even our Omnioculars-equipped observers weren’t able to see everything she did. We know she quasi-exclusively used fire incantations to get rid of the flytraps, creepers, Strangler lianas and barb-roses. By her own admission, I know she used an ancient incendiary spell called the Helios’ Wrath to handle the Devil’s Snare, and the rest of the fire spells are all in the five years of our curriculum.”

Neville grimaced at the reminder the third-year Ravenclaw had repelled the same plant Professor Sprout had chosen for the Forbidden Corridor during their first year. The future Longbottom Lord had thought naively they had handled fine the dangerous plant when they went after Quirrell. Potter had changed the very definition of ‘handing fine a Devil’s Snare’. The Ravenclaw mustn’t have spent thirty seconds defeating the last obstacle to the ‘victory jewels’.

“I don’t know why we are spending so much time speaking about Potter or the Ravenclaws,” George Hooper intervened. The older Gryffindor kept his disinterested expression as half of the Common Room’s heads turned in his direction. “I mean yes, she won this preliminary and failing a major disaster she will be the Ravenclaw Champion. But it was already guaranteed after the trial on the Black Lake, no? MacDougal and Granger aren’t in it to win, and Chang and Davies aren’t good enough to challenge her. Let’s speak about something more concerning. We have a lot of aspirants from our House who think breaking the rules is fine...”

“At least I acted to prevent the Dark Lady from winning the preliminary!” Cormac McLaggen retorted.

“And it worked so well,” Alicia Spinnet commented in a voice filled with mockery that was heard by pretty much everyone. “You received a disqualification notice, zero points, and Alexandra Potter won.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Kenneth Towler said. “Everyone has his or her own opinion on the Exiled Queen, that’s fine. I’m more interested in the next preliminary which will be take place in March. Personally, I don’t know anything about it. Does anybody have a clue what we will have to do?”

“We haven’t heard many rumours for the moment...” one of the Weasley Twins, certainly Fred, began.

“But the first two tasks had an elemental theme and one of the Head of Houses to supervise it,” finished George – or Fred. “Professor Flitwick used his Charms on the Black Lake and the flags in the middle of the ice. This was a Ravenclaw trial and the water theme. We will certainly have something similar to do once our own turn comes. And the Temple of Plants was obviously Professor Sprout’s trial with an earth theme.”

“That would leave the trial of fire and the trial of air,” Katie Bell concluded, “and Professor McGonagall and Snape would be the teachers in charge.”

Suddenly, Neville was reminded a certain enigma positioned after an unconscious mountain troll. The Boy-Who-Lived coughed.

“I have...reasons to believe Snape would be in charge of the trial of fire,” He told the Lion’s assembly. The Head of Slytherin had a thing for dangerous cursed flames, and since Professor Sprout had used Devil’s Snare as an obstacle, there was no reason to believe the dungeon bat could not organise a variation of his obstacle. Leo and Ron nodded, evidently remembering the violet and black flames too.

“Prepare a potion to jump through a wall of cursed flames, you mean?” Seamus looked like someone had announced his imminent death. With a few seconds of delay, most of the Gryffindors expressed gloomy and defeated expressions. For dozens of Lions, himself included, preparing an advanced Potion was guaranteed to end in catastrophe...although maybe if impartial judges were overseeing everything, the absence of Snape could make all the difference.

“And the preliminary of Professor McGonagall?” asked Carl Hopkins. “It could be Transfiguration before Potions, for all we know.”

“We should ask her directly,” Rachael Codnor proposed. “The Hufflepuff were told exactly the spells they would need for their preliminary. When the champions of fair-play are cheating with special herbicide Charms, I see no reason why we wouldn’t do the same thing.”

There were a lot of nods and sounds of approval to support this affirmation. When one saw all the Hufflepuff cast several Charms and jinxes that no Ravenclaw had heard before, there was something shady under the scenes.

“We also need to do something about Cassius Warrington,” Cormac spoke again with a more tolerant voice than the one he had minutes ago. “The junior Death Eater is in the lead to become the Slytherin Champion; raise your hands if you want him representing our school.”

Not one hand was raised in approval, obviously. Warrington was one of the nastiest and loudest anti-Muggle-born purists of House Slytherin. To see a teenager who would undoubtedly get a Dark Mark in mere weeks if there was You-Know-Who around become the Slytherin Champion was giving him nausea.

Neville had considered ‘pranking’ him during the task, of course. Unfortunately...

“Yes, yes,” Fred – or George – began with an exhausted expression. “We aren’t fond of Warrington. But the other true competitors are no prizes either. Graham Montague? He was with Warrington and they had identical Death Eater robes last year. Theodore Nott? He’s younger but I wouldn’t lend him a Knut unless my life depended on it. Lucian Bole? Peregrine Derrick? Crabbe? Goyle? These four could be human-sized trolls for all we know. Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini are more acceptable, but they clearly have no intention to become the Champion of House Slytherin.”

And that was the end of the topic for this meeting. No one, not even McLaggen, was able to propose a way to eliminate between five and seven students out of the nine Snakes participating.

“Hufflepuff?” Angelina changed the subject with a large smile.

The Twins’ eyes rose to the ceiling at the same time.

“Yes, let’s speak about the favourite of the Ladies, our national Cedric Diggory...”

**22 February 1994, Beauxbatons, France**

There were some people, Henri knew, who took their broom and went to ride it for hours when they needed to bleed off stress, ignore the pressure of their peers for an afternoon, or simply change their minds.

The Champion of Horus had never seen much point to it, but then his skills on a broom had always been described as ‘pathetic’, and it was when the tutors hired by his family were the jury. If there were more impartial judges around, the Heir of the de Condé distinguished line knew the words would have certainly been more...venomous.

As a consequence, he had known broom racing, Quidditch, and every sport involving brooms were not for him. It didn’t bother him that much. Broom-racing, to say nothing of the other broom sports, was a very dangerous activity and Henri didn’t think he needed to decrease his life-expectancy by participating in these crazy races or Bludger-filled games.

No, the Beauxbatons student had other passions and hobbies. Something his parents had totally encouraged the moment he was judged old enough to make choices on his own. It was only a couple of years ago he had learned that every Condé was encouraged to know a non-magical activity before puberty. It was apparently a legacy of having his great-great-grandfather once forced to hide in the Muggle as a wood worker to hide from assassins.

Henri had chosen cooking. While some of his year-mates regularly laughed at him for this decision, the young French noble wondered how they would react if the House Elves of the kitchens departed one day to never return.

Besides, the little adorable servants weren’t all-knowing and the best cooks of creation. All the recipes known to the House Elves had arrived to them because they had been told by older, more experienced House Elves. There was little innovation in the Beauxbatons kitchens, and many restaurants of Paris and the other important enclaves were guilty of it too. It was not a coincidence all the cooking instructors hired by his mother were Muggles.

Today he had decided to prepare a *brandade de morue*. It had cost him quite a few Sickles to get the lemon, the parsley, the garlic and every spice along with the stockfish on the same day from his usual market suppliers, but he felt it was going to be worth it. The smell was already divine, and he could only thank the Light Powers he was in a school where high-ranking students could practise in specialised wings their extracurricular passions.

“Condé!”

And it had been such a lovely day until...now. The French Heir could only pray the bad vibes weren’t going to disturb the cooking of one of his favourite dishes.

“Delacour,” Henri hadn’t turned the head to see who was here, but this haughty, self-righteous voice could only belong to a single person. “Some people consider it rude to enter the private kitchens of a cook without knocking...”

“Have you seen the Hogwarts preliminary in a Pensieve?”

Ah, it was *that*.

“I have,” the Light Champion answered calmly. “What?” He voiced as when their eyes met, the blonde-haired witch was evidently surprised. “Knowledge is power, and Hogwarts’ students will be our opponents in a few months. I would be an idiot not to investigate a bit about who will be the most powerful rivals of our generation.”

3...2...1...

“And you haven’t thought to inform me of your investigations?” the Heiress of the Delacour declared outraged.

Henri kept his eyes on his future lunch, and cast a temperature Charm to slow down by a few minutes the cooking. Unlike some, he knew where his priorities laid.

“Why should I? You and I are not friends, Heiress Delacour. You may think your chances are high to be the lead-Champion now that you have triumphed during the first preliminary task, and maybe you have the power and the skills to justify it in the two other trials to come. But whether you will become a Champion in the European Magical Tournament or not, we won’t be friends or allies.”

“Orders have come from above...” At this moment the natural beauty wasn’t enough to hide the ugliness underneath.

“I have seen certain orders, yes.” Henri yawned. “Let me tell you I have no intention to obey them. I am Champion of Horus, and a Condé. There are three beings on this earth I obey without question, and two are my parents.”

The third was Horus, obviously.

“You have no idea of the power the murderous psychopath serving Death has at its disposal.”

“On the contrary,” he replied. “The Morrigan Champion is more dangerous than you and I. When she will go after you, I don’t want to be anywhere nearby.”

“Death or Chaos will kill you,” spat the daughter of the French Minister before storming out.

“Good luck finding a husband for this pure-blooded Harpy,” Henri de Condé shook his head before returning to his cooking.

**23 February 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“In my opinion, you’re showing off too much.”

Alexandra huffed.

“You realise, Morag, that I’ve not used one hundred percent of my skill and power to clear the Temple of Plants.”

“I realise that,” her red-haired friend did. “But most of the Gryffindors, Slytherins and Ravenclaws who are against you are spreading their lies about you being a Dark Lady again. If you crush the next two preliminaries, I suspect they are going to get more panicky and push their parents to intervene...”

“I suppose Weasley, Black, McLaggen, Edgecombe and some of our junior Death Eater friends are among the prime suspects?”

“Yes, they are,” Alexandra sighed and tried to find the correct conclusion to the Charms essay she had been writing in the last hour.

“I am almost tempted to invent a few curses just for the pleasure to cast them on these idiots,” the Potter Heiress admitted after a couple of seconds. “Do they realise that the other schools’ candidates are going to be absolutely ruthless next November?”

Lyre had told her yesterday Fleur Delacour had won the first Beauxbatons preliminary. Assuming this was confirmed by other victories, a Light Champion who had proved she had no compunction about trying to kill her would participate in the Tournament.

And Durmstrang had Lyudmila Romanov, a Champion of Chaos, to lead its students to victory.

So yes, her last question was not rhetorical.

“I’m not sure they do,” said Morag. “Well, some Slytherins understand it, that’s why they have their Death Eater’s spawns trying to be champions.”

Something the Lion’s House had at last noticed. Better late than never, Alexandra supposed.

“But fine, if a lot of people are content to present an image of mediocrity, I suppose we will have to play along,” the green-eyed witch sniffed in derision. “Anyway the two other preliminaries will likely be supervised by McGonagall and Snape. I really doubt they are going to propose something we Ravenclaw have studied on our own this year. It wouldn’t play to the strengths of their Houses.”

“Assuming they have strengths, of course,” added her Irish friend.

“Yes, assuming that,” Alexandra didn’t know what most of the Slytherins and Gryffindors did every day at Hogwarts, but it certainly wasn’t academic work, physical reinforcement of their skills, or studies of esoteric spells. The Ravenclaw third-year had limited herself to conventional and legal ‘average’ spells save one, and despite this she was so far ahead of her potential fellow champions it was ridiculous in the extreme. By the White Tower, Hermione had ten times the spells and the knowledge of some fifth and sixth-years Lions and Badgers! Where was the world going to? “If the scores continue like this, the other winners of these preliminaries will be Angelina Johnson, Cedric Diggory and Cassius Warrington. The last one is useless, but the former two have potential...provided they train seriously this summer and abandon any ridiculous notion of fair-play.”

And it was far, far from a given.

“I just hope Dumbledore is going to have a heart attack when he will realise the disaster waiting for him next November...”

**26 February 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

“NO! NOT THE LEFT! THE RIGHT! THE RIGHT!”

The shouts of Old Frederick were filled by a feeling sounding a lot like exasperation. The flying lesson was...not going well. At least Fingolfin managed to avoid the trees...this time.

“This is a disaster,” grumbled the Green Welsh. “There were drunk wizards in the 1600s flying better than that!”

“Oh come on, now you’re exaggerating,” Alexandra objected with a sniff.

“THIS IS A DISASTER! NO! THE LEFT! THE LEFT! YOU MUST GO WITH THE WIND NOT AGAINST IT!”

She couldn’t deny the flight of her young dragon was not a model of grace and agility – though as always the bigger and older greenish dragon was melodramatic. By the Morrigan, Alexandra wasn’t sure the most ancient resident of Zabini Manor – Old Frederick had been retransferred from the dragon preserve for these lessons – could fly for long distances. Stella Zabini and the personnel working on the dragons had confirmed they were regularly giving the ancient reptile Sleeping Potions and were using a combination of magical and non-magical transports to move him from Point A to B.

“HE’S NOT PAYING ENOUGH ATTENTION!” the draconic instructor roared.

“I think the problem is that we don’t have enough information about the Britannian Gold species as a whole.”

This shortage of information was not for lack of trying. Hermione had nearly opened every book in the Hogwarts library to see if there was any information available. Morag had recruited some of her cousins to visit dozens of magical libraries everywhere in the British Isles to see if there wasn’t some ancient parchment on the extinct species of dragons. Most familial libraries at their disposal had been investigated, in pure loss. At best, the Exiled had been able to confirm that yes, the Britannian was once a large species of dragon, one which had likely met its end during the Battle of Camlann or shortly after.

But otherwise, the information was extremely limited and vague. The Middle Ages – that some factions in Wizarding society continued to call the Dark Ages – had not been a period known for its love of literature preservation. For example, as far as the Potter Heiress knew, no diary or personal book from the Founders’ time had survived to be read by the students of her era.

It didn’t mean the records didn’t exist, obviously. Maybe near-eternal organisations like the Exchequer or the Army of the Light had managed to salvage records, wand lore, spells and priceless information about the magical knowledge considered ‘normal’ one thousand and five hundred years ago. But if they were, they weren’t sharing...the Queen’s ‘proposal’ excepted, she supposed.

However, this didn’t solve her problems with the lack of information wherever her shiny Fingolfin was involved. Everything which was taken granted for species like the dark-scaled Hebridean Black, the Chinese Fireball or the more common Welsh Green didn’t exist. Flight skills, eating habits, life-expectancy...in many ways Fingolfin might as well be the first member of an entirely new species and the first test subject which would be used to teach and educate all the other baby dragons if they managed to hatch the other eggs this summer.

“YOU’RE GIVING HIM TOO MANY EXCUSES!” Let it not be said Old Frederick was a big softie. “YOU’RE CODDLING HIM!”

“If I’m not defending him, who will?” Alexandra asked, half-marvelling at the fact she was debating with a talking dragon the finest points of draconic education. “He is like me.”

The young Britannian Gold would never have a true father and mother to hunt for him, teach him how to fly correctly, advise him on what eatable and what was not, and plenty of other things universal for every species on this planet.

Her situation at the Dursleys hadn’t been that bad – Vernon was a walrus in appearance, but he still belonged to humanity – but unlike these good-for-nothing relatives, she wasn’t going to abandon her duties just because Fingolfin calling her ‘Mommy’ made all of her friends roll on the ground laughter every week.

“I hatched his egg. He is my responsibility.” Oh the dragon handlers of House Zabini would be here for him every day of the next decade if she wasn’t, but for all their competence they were not used to talking dragons, and handling fire-breathing reptiles on a daily basis was rarely involving emotional links.

“HE FLIGHTS LIKE A LEVITATING BOULDER,” commented the Welsh Green, exhaling a cloud of smoke which temporarily blinded everything in the vicinity.

“He will get better. It’s like riding a bicycle for humans. We aren’t good at it when we begin, but after the first falls and bruises, we improve and gain the required skills.”

On this Old Frederick didn’t retort. Or perhaps he didn’t know what a bicycle was?

“Anyway, I think it’s best to stop the flying session for today. I want to test a bit his breath against the testing rocks.”

“I REPEAT: YOU’RE CODDLING HIM TOO MUCH.”

The green-eyed teenager snorted.

“Like you have any room to talk, Sir ‘I want a large number of people to scratch my scales’ and ‘I am sleeping twenty hours out of twenty-four’. Come Fingolfin, the big grandpa needs his beauty sleep.”

“Bye grandpa!” The adorable gold-scaled dragon chipped and a large rumble of annoyance was heard from the Green Welsh. Both dragon and witch decided to not tempt their luck further and quickly vacated the dragon’s pen.

They went back in direction of Zabini Manor, watched by several dozen owls. Since she came here to train Fingolfin, the bellows of Old Frederick, the small roars of Fingolfin and her own voice had attracted the owls and the other birds which were permanent residents inside the Black Widow’s main residence.

Her young dragon naturally tried to jump-fly on her shoulder from behind. This time alas for him, she was ready, and seized him with both arms. The Hydra Animagus did her best not to wince. She had assimilated the second head of the Hydra mentally and physically this month, but Fingolfin was quite heavy now. The Gold Britannian had reached an above-average dog’s size in weight now, and he had the weight going with it.

“I want a story, Mommy!” Perhaps Old Frederick was right. Maybe she was coddling her protégé too much. But only one person who had never succumbed to the puppy eyes the baby dragon was giving her may have the right to throw her the first stone.

And so Alexandra cleared her throat.

“Once upon a time, in a land far, far away...lived a Hobbit.”

**27 February 1994, Somewhere off the Norwegian coast**

The first Durmstrang preliminary, to no one’s surprise, did not take place at Durmstrang. A minority of students had bet with their friends that it was always possible some of the underground duel arenas were going to be used, but the probability of such an event happening had been judged...ridiculously low, to use a polite expression.

It wasn’t exactly impossible to organise an international-level task here in northern Scandinavia when it was the middle of February. But magic or no magic, there was no denying it would be complicated. The snow was more than four metres deep in some places, the wind was screaming its fury over the mountains and every location not protected by weather wards, and you never knew what sort of XXXXX predator was roaming outside, hungry for some tasty meat.

Astrid thought that even *Krum* of all people would not train in such an environment – not that it was a slim possibility, now that the Quidditch maniac was recruited to play as Reserve Seeker for the national Bulgarian team.

Yet the moment the Portkey landed her on the ground once more and the Norwegian girl had the opportunity to recognise the place where the preliminary was organised, her first thought was that after all, maybe, just maybe holding the trial at Durmstrang would not have been so bad.

There was a fjord nearby. The view from their Portkey arrival’s zone was beautiful. That was it for the good news.

The bad news, judging by the roars, the flames and several other obvious factors in the distance, was the little problem of being at the entrance of one of the largest Norwegian Ridgeback preserves in Scandinavia.

“Dragons,” murmured Astrid. “Why did it have to be dragons?”

The Norwegian pureblood had seen her first Ridgeback five days past her tenth birthday when Father had accepted the invitation of one of his business partners owning one of the preserves. The experience had been sufficient for her to stay far, far away from the dragon handlers or any profession which required going closer than three hundred feet from a live specimen.

This wasn’t something Astrid had let slipped in front of her circle of allies at Durmstrang, but in the contrary case there wouldn’t have been laughter or whispers she was a coward. An adult dragon was terrifying, and anyone who didn’t think so had suffered mental damage before answering the question.

XXXXX-class creatures were not born to be caressed or cuddled. The smaller breeds could kill dozens of wizards if they went on a rampage. The bigger ones – and guess which category the Norwegian Ridgeback was in? – could wipe out hundreds. Their scales were so magically resistant most of the direct assaults had to be overwhelming and cast by many, many wizards to have a chance of working. The bite was, most often than not, poison. Their flames could melt metal. One blow from their tails or their claws could cut a human being in two. And for reasons no one had shared with her, a lot of dragons instinctively loathed humanity, deliberately going their way to fight and kill some of the handlers keeping them in the preserves since they had crawled out of their eggs.

And if fighting a dark-scaled beast weighting more than a vault’s door didn’t make one’s afraid, as she had said before...you were stupid or you had the skills and the raw power of the – deceased – Dark Lord Grindelwald.

Astrid grimaced in the privacy of her mind. This was bad. Norwegian Ridgeback dragons were protected by Norwegian and ICW law, so this wasn’t going to be a fight to the death or any trial which might cause harm to a mature dragon. Unfortunately, unless she missed her guess, the same wouldn’t necessarily apply for the lives of the participants.

But asking to return to Durmstrang right now would definitely be considered cowardice. And so Astrid Sverre lined up behind the three other girls who had agreed to participate in the preliminaries.

It went without saying they were massively outnumbered by the boys. Dangerous or not, the European Magical Tournament had a lot of money prizes for the victorious champions. There were also potential Apprenticeships, glory, masterly-enchanted artefacts and resources to increase one’s standing and the prestige of the House you belonged to. As such, nearly ten percent of the Durmstrang body had come – all in all approximately between one hundred and one hundred ten male teenagers.

This was one of the reasons why there were so few girls participating. With magical powerhouses and experts in the Dark Arts by the dozens putting their name forward, the majority of the Heiresses were not confident their Duellist talents and academic performances would be useful in countering lethal curses from their school enemies.

The other reason there were not many female candidatures could be laid at the boots of the girl leading their column in a red-black cloak and crimson robes. The Dark Queen was judged sufficiently terrifying that no witch having an enmity with her had considered entering the Tournament. And no one at Durmstrang, including the Masters of each department, had blamed them.

It was one thing to step on a duel platform knowing you were likely going to be humiliated and mildly injured, before spending a few days in the hands of the healers. It was something completely different to know the judges and the security teams weren’t going to protect you if the Dark Queen decided your death was the first thing on her daily schedule.

Therefore, there were only four girls today. The first was Lyudmila Romanov of course, and the second and third were her chief lieutenants Roksana Vulchanova and Katharina Feuerbach. She was the last...she supposed the Dark Queen had need of a girl and a member of the Monster-Hunter Guild to complete the roster of one Champion and three replacements.

There was no doubt in the halls and dorms who was going to be the female Champion, clearly. In fact, the informal arrangement the boys would compete against boys and the girls were against girls must have given large smiles of relief to the former. The Russian and German lieutenants were just below Lady-level magically, and their arsenals of Dark Arts spells were only inferior to the one they had sworn their wands to.

Finally their progression stopped and they were ordered to form in a parade presentation in front of the High Master of the Durmstrang Institute and several people in fine robes who were certainly the ICW judges – three or four of them had the distinct looks of old and fat politicians who had made their lives off speaking at Geneva.

“Students! Today opens a new page in the glorious history of the Durmstrang Institute! Today you are walking the first step which will see your school teach Europe that the greatest and mightiest education centre of magical education from the Urals to the Atlantic is Durmstrang!” Per his habit, Karkaroff was throwing thick propaganda around. A lot of the boys were swallowing it without thinking, but not all. And the three other girls in front of her had the physical behaviour of someone bored to death. “No school will stop you from claiming the greatest inter-school trophy of your generation! Hogwarts is weak and afraid of its own shadow! Beauxbatons refuses to accept there is anything acceptable save courtesy, art and flowers! The Italians of the Scuola Regina are wealthy mongrels trying to rise above their station! Sixteen among you will be chosen, sixteen will fight, struggle, and in the end conquer! Long live the Durmstrang Institute!”

“HAIL DURMSTRANG!” Over one hundred voices answered automatically.

Astrid didn’t know who the High Master was going to impress the most: the spectators – they were hundreds of them to the right and left – the five judges or his own students.

“Can we begin the preliminary now?” Astrid heard Poliakov whisper to her right. “By the ice spires, I thought there was going to be some action, not listening to the politicians...”

But waiting under a group of eighty-plus years-old wizards in outrageous robes had finished speaking the most boring platitudes...it was exactly what they had to endure, and in respectful silence please.

By the time they entered for real the dragon preserve, they had lost more than one hour, and a lot of the elder boys looked like they were ready to pass their nerves on something or someone.

Fortunately, they had not to walk long after that to see the place where they were all going to compete.

The organisers had carved a sort of volcanic labyrinth into the valley. The word ‘volcanic’ was especially important. It wasn’t because there was a volcano in the vicinity; it was because four dragons were busy breathing colossal bursts of dragonfire, melting the rocks and creating a river of flames slowly descending in the main passages of the labyrinth. There were pulsating arrays of Runes visible from their current position, along with large Norwegian Firecrabs, Geyser Salamanders, and Fire Cobras.

The three species should have been no problem for an average wizard, but surrounded by this warmth and this quantity of fire, the danger they represented had been magnified by three or four.

Meagre consolation, the Norwegian Ridgebacks were in chains and far away from the preliminary’s arena, watched over by dozens of dragon handlers.

This was an extremely dangerous task, but it wasn’t impossible to accomplish. The fire, once past the element of surprise, was rather slow to propagate and the animals chosen to block the entrances were not known for their celerity and their ferocity.

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” boomed one of the foreign judges – a dark-skinned wizard in a very exotic African-style violet robe. “Thank you for coming here today and volunteering to test the Fire preliminary! The principle of this task is rather simple. There is a room somewhere in this labyrinth where fake crystal balls have been hidden. These are not of course valuable artefacts for Divination coursework, merely some enchanted trinkets giving you a clue or two for the next preliminary. Enter the labyrinth, find the crystal ball with your name on it, and leave the labyrinth by the correct door; this will be your task for today.”

“Is that all?” asked politely Katharina Feuerbach, in what was obviously a sarcastic comment.

“Err...not quite, Miss,” the judge replied quickly. “You see...”

The labyrinth chose this moment to begin to rotate on itself, slowly, but provoking new paths for the flames and the rest of the molten stone to invade everywhere the labyrinth.

“You are only authorised your wand and no other type of magical foci. Potions like Polyjuice, Felix Felicis and many other competition-prohibited substances are of course forbidden. Summoning objects outside the arena is legal, but the handlers are regularly charming their possessions against fire and summoning, so don’t expect to meet much success on that front. And of course you will be grade by ten judges, including your Headmaster and myself, for a maximum possible of one hundred points. Any volunteers?”

“Yes,” Lyudmila Romanov immediately answered, removing her black-red cloak and giving it her to Vulchanova. “Anyone objects?”

The boys of the crowd looked at each other nervously, but no one dared open his mouth. Besides, everyone had been able to give a good look at the labyrinth in fire and this wasn’t planning to be a stroll in the snow. Powerful magical shields and incantations were going to be needed to cross this arena without suffering horrible burns.

The Dark Queen advanced on the platform, and as a cannon thundered in the distance, shadows began to shroud her. In mere seconds, words echoed around the valley, each syllabus making them shiver. The effect was all but too visible. The flames were dying where the Russian Champion was walking, or outright vanished into nothingness. Fire beasts were outright fleeing from their positions, all their reputation of labyrinth guardians insufficient to let them stay and oppose a tiny amount of resistance.

It was like a spell of sheer terror had been cast on everyone and everything. The earth and the flames were out of control, but somehow ended away from the blonde-haired witch.

It took four minutes for the scion of the Imperial House to find her crystal ball, and two more to leave the labyrinth. Already Astrid and the other Durmstrang students knew there was no way they could do better.

The judges shared this opinion, if their grades were any indication.

“Lady Lyudmila Romanov, one hundred points!”

**Author’s note**: There are a lot of reasons Chaos Champions are making everyone very, very afraid. This was the shadow of one. Now imagine being forced to participate in the same task against her...