**Chapter 68**

**The Temple of Plants**

**10 February 1994, Nantes, France**

James often dreamed of Hogwarts. Or at least, he tried to. It was...complicated.

Many of his fondest memories had happened at the Scottish school. One had been when he had been sorted in Gryffindor. In first year during the last winter Potions class, they had poured a glue of their own invention on the Slytherin seats.

He remembered them...sometimes. It took a lot of effort to remember. It took even more effort to know intimately why these memories were so important. The Dementors had not taken these precious moments from him, the mind protections of being an Animagus had prevented that, but the monstrous guardians of Azkaban had come very, very close. A lot of his memories still existed inside his mind, but the emotions had been stripped from the happy events.

The souvenirs were now like grey blurs. A small number shone, the Dementors having lacked the time to take all the light away, but otherwise there was so much fog and indistinct bad situations. All the detentions served in the castle were still vivid, for most of them had not been anything but boring and exhausting hours. It appeared neither the Dementor nor the Ministry saw much point in copying lines.

The former Lord of House Potter chuckled, but was unable to put much joy in it. Echoes of pain flared everywhere in his body. There was poison running in his veins, and each day was worse than the previous one.

“How long? How long until you will be satisfied, vampire?”

There was no answer...the bedroom was empty. It was night. The Healers had left, and he was alone.

“Alone...alone...Merlin, I’m going mad...”

At times he thought even the pains and the visit from his wife were hallucinations. A lot of things that happened on a day-to-day basis were impossible to remember. He was forgetting plenty of things. But there was poison in his veins. The Healers had discovered it a couple of days ago. They believed it was another secondary effect of the Azkaban jailers, but James knew the truth. Oh yes, he knew the truth.

The pain and the growing health problems were not from them...it was her...it was her fault.

Why? He had loved her once upon a time...he had loved her. He remembered that, if not the entire story and the happiness...

“I could escape. I could escape...”

James tried to rise from the bed, and instantly was struck with more pain and extreme exhaustion, plus some vertigo when he was almost able to stand up...grimacing he was forced to fall again on his bed.

Hogwarts. He had to think about Hogwarts. That way, the bad memories wouldn’t hurt, and she wouldn’t pursue him, accuse him in his dreams. Hogwarts. Where it had all begun. They had created the Marauders. They had been the Kings of Pranks and Mayhem. The castle would remember them forever. From the top of the towers to the darkest dungeons, they had marked the classrooms of Hogwarts with their magnificent pranks and audacious schemes.

They had shown everyone that the Snakes were not to be trusted, but that the Lions had claws, and the Light was something to put your confidence in. They were things worth fighting and protecting...the darkness would be in time forgotten. The Dark Lord would be vanquished. They had Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix to protect Britain...

“Dumbledore. Why did you never come? I was waiting...”

No, Dumbledore...Dumbledore must have believed the lies. Lies spread by Death Eaters and their ilk. Or was there a traitor waiting to be discovered? Or was Peter the traitor? Was Remus a traitor? There had to be a traitor, in addition to Lily...she had dealt with the vampires, but the followers of You-Know-Who must have a spy too...

Shaking off his thoughts, the man who had been imprisoned in Azkaban for over twelve years returned to a sleeping position and tried to return to something approaching calm and peace, or at least as much as the insidious poison the vampire born from Lily’s body allowed him.

Ten heartbeats passed. One hundred heartbeats passed. Sleep didn’t come. Pain and bad memories assaulted him and prevented him from falling asleep.

After two hundred more heartbeats, he began to hear them. There were footsteps. To start with, he thought they were clinic security wizards making their patrols, but the sounds were those of speed, urgent and not discreet.

Then he heard the first shout.

Someone screamed what sounded like an incantation. There was an explosion. James opened his eyes, and undoubtedly there were sounds of alert and more rushed footsteps. There was also light coming from the corridor leading to his room.

The British patient had not long to wait before someone opened the door, and despite not looking directly at it, the light momentarily blinded him.

Before he had time to recover, two or three figures in white robes were on him, pointing wands, and murmuring charms which weren’t French, English, or any language he was aware of. Then a woman’s voice began to speak in heavily-accented French.

“He has been poisoned, Captain. We will need more time to examine him properly, but I think Manticore’s blood for the core ingredient and time-altering, pain-altering Thaumaturgy curses to make sure the agony is incredibly long.”

“As can be expected from our enemies,” a male voice answered. “We will have to heal him later. For the moment transporting him is the priority. Stabilise him, and we move.”

“Hey!” James managed to get out before something hit him and suddenly it was like he was swimming in something fluffy and soft...except he couldn’t speak anymore and everything seemed so distant...

“Rejoice, James Potter. It is the will of the High Council of the Army of Light that you continue to live. You have faithfully served the Light for many years by your sacrifices, and you will continue to do so.”

Why? Why had they come now? There was something on the tip of his tongue...

“The Dark will not be allowed to win this war.”

**11 February 1994, Rome, Italy**

Two thousand years ago, Palatine Hill had been the heart of an Empire. Augustus, Princeps of Rome and Julius Caesar’s heir, had built his palace there, and after his death his successors had gradually made sure the place became the sole and exclusive domain of the Emperors.

Today Palatine Hill had no more kings, senators, or supreme sovereigns honouring its presence. It was an archaeological site opened to the myriad of tourists who visited the Eternal City.

And after sunset, in the middle of winter, it was quite dark.

It was a testimony to how low prestigious civilisations deemed invincible by their opponents could succumb to the ravages of time.

It was also an acceptable meeting place for the Exchequer Knights, since any man or woman trespassing nearby could be promptly and decisively eliminated without any major issue.

“So the Army of Light has decided to take possession of the Champion of the Morrigan’s father,” Knight Priest stated, seated upon a large remnant of a pillar which had once been part of Domitian Palace. “As always, I’m amazed by their incredible strategy skills.”

The glare the white-robed expert in Dark Rituals weighed in direction of the place where the Circus Maximus had once stood could not be described as particularly respectful or impressed.

“To be honest, it’s not like they have a lot of choices now,” Pedro Borja replied, in a tone that said he definitely felt no pity for the Army of Light. “Between your elimination of the Light Champion and the slaughter Death’s Champion delivered before your arrival, the Light baboons have lost one of their primary task forces, and our operations on every continent have cost them more agents, supporters, and war-wizards. They are definitely under pressure now.”

“It’s also entirely possible the High Council of the Light might think the Potter Heiress is responsible for the near-total eradication of the Male-Foi line,” Hélène de Broglie intervened.

“What?” Since Knight Priest had not removed his mask, it was not simple to see how surprised he was, but the simple fact that he had was surprised at all was a good indicator he hadn’t seen this coming. “You told me she was on the Brazilian coast for the Winter Holidays!”

“She was.” Angelica thought using the idiocy of the Light to confound the white-robed Knight was amusing, but they had other, more important subjects of discussion to speak of tonight. “It’s Heiress Lyre de Male-Foi who murdered her cousins and other relatives. Apparently, she took offense to the manner in which the secondary branch was trying to resolve the inheritance dilemma.”

The Succubus was not the only one to grin after this ‘revelation’. Enemy or not, Hogwarts’ students were beginning to react to Dumbledore’s inept rule in very interesting ways.

“Humph. And you are sure it isn’t going to derail our plans?”

Knight Informer scoffed.

“Knight Priest, it was you and no one else who killed the Light Champion at Hogsmeade. If the Light is so delusional to think the Morrigan’s Chosen in this world is the biggest opponent they have to be wary of, I think they are going to have a few rude awakenings in the years to come.”

“That might be so,” countered the only Knight of the four present tonight to not have revealed his public identity. “But unlike the Army of Light, we still need the Champion of Death alive for the next few years.”

“You think James Potter, an average wizard whose sole talent was to become an Animagus before adulthood, would be able to slay a girl who has a killing count rivalling certain Rooks?” Hélène asked while raising an eyebrow.

“Put like that, it sounds ridiculous,” Knight Priest admitted. “But James Potter is her father, and in the two instances she faced him, she has deliberately chosen to spare him. People always do improbable and stupid things when family and trusted friends are involved.”

The glacial voice of the Knight hinted he spoke with experience on the subject, and that the lesson had been painfully learned.

“They lost their most experienced Champion and the sole survivor of the old generation we had been unable to finish off,” the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina said in a conversational voice. “Surely they must realise that after the slaughter at Hogsmeade, further attempts are unlikely to result in anything but more deaths and slaughter.”

There was some point where you had to stop throwing bodies and money at a problem, and for Angelica Sforza, the Army of Light had already spent too many lives trying to kill the daughter of her Apprentice.

Yes, there were probably more dangerous wizards kept in the Light’s employ, but each loss would be more and more devastating. Already the title of Champion of Archangel Michael had been given to a Veela hybrid, which by all evidence should never have been considered in peace time.

“They can probably cure and brainwash James Potter to kill his daughter,” even the golden-robed Spanish Ward-Master didn’t hide how desperate the Army of Light would be to believe this plan would work. “But...Knight’s Recruiter Apprentice used Manticore’s blood. Ritual or not, you need a lot of time and resources to heal from that type of poison if you aren’t immunised beforehand. It’s highly likely we will be in May or June before the man is able to fight a duel with a five-year-old child with his bare hands.”

“Unless He has returned.”

The name hadn’t been uttered, but the short remark by Knight Priest forced grim expressions.

Hélène was the first to reply.

“Since Myrddin is still imprisoned in his Air Fortress, I presume you’re speaking of the First Archmage?”

“I do. He’s likely the only one who can convince Trinity and the Army of Light to join forces once more.”

“Worrying,” Angelica had to recognise.

“Worrying...if we have proof,” The Knight Treasurer amended. “There have been many false-alerts in the last decades. I will not divert funds and hunters in pursuit of a ghost or a pretender with delusions of grandeur.”

“You will have them.”

“So be it,” the Spanish Knight answered. “We will return a few Pawns to Hogwarts’ monitoring just in case. Now let’s speak of our involvement in the civil wars we engineered in Africa...”

**10 February 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Penelope was pretty sure there were few Professors and almost no students outside this evening – and in the case of Professors, this was because she had seen Professor Grubbly-Plank rush in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

It was snowing, and it wasn’t a few snowflakes this time. No, Hogwarts and the surrounding lands were once again covered in a white mantle. The rains of January’s end had almost been enough to remove the Christmas landscape, but now that the cold and the bad weather were back, so were the ice and the various issues which went with it.

How bad the weather was? A good indication was the fact there was no Quidditch team beginning a training session as she approached. Clearly, even the Quaffle-worshipper known as Oliver Wood – a demon who had somehow managed to seize the Captainship of the Gryffindor team – had judged going out tonight wasn’t worth the trouble.

Of course, the absence of any Gryffindors and Slytherins anywhere near the Quidditch stands didn’t mean the stadium was completely empty or silent.

In the middle of the field, a long black-robed figure was lighting the stands and everything else nearby with powerful fire and lightning incantations.

The spectacle gave her pause for several minutes. Tornadoes of flames burst into existence, sometimes taking the shape of animals, sometimes vanishing after an explosion or a simple gust. Lightning cracked and spread everywhere in variant shades of green and red. And at irregular intervals there were ice bombardments and other elemental-focused spells.

Yes, in hindsight the choice of meeting location made a lot of sense. It just wasn’t possible for a witch or a wizard to test dangerous spells like these in abandoned classrooms or halls in disuse.

In a way, this reassured the seventh-year Ravenclaw...and in others, not at all.

Theoretically, Penelope knows how to cast many of these lightning and fire spells. Some elemental-based incantations were talked about in Charms and DADA, and as for the others...well the Head Girl was a Ravenclaw. Large sections of the library were no longer secret to her now that she had half a year of classes left at Hogwarts.

That’s the theory. While she had trained to be proficient in a few dangerous Blasting spells and offensive-oriented magical attacks after the attacks of second year, Penelope had long admitted she was not a frontline fighter. Physical activity had never attracted much, and on the usual scale to measure magical cores, the blonde-haired teenager had been registered with a kappa-blue when she decided to test it with the Ministry at the end of her sixth-year.

All of this to say she would never try to train for half an hour in the middle of a small blizzard with devastating war spells.

A sentiment evidently not shared by the girl four years her junior training in the abandoned stadium.

Loudly, she cast a few blue fireworks to warn the other Ravenclaw she had arrived. Penelope was pretty much sure she was seen despite the snow, because the powerful column of fire which had just been created was cancelled in an instant and seconds later more green fireworks informed her it was safe to walk on the pitch’s grass.

“Interesting choice of spells,” the Prefect commented as she was only a few feet away from Alexandra Potter and the sounds propagated by the wind were not loud enough to deafen her voice.

“I’m trying to vary my repertoire,” the third-year girl replied. “And since none of the four teams requisitioned the area today, I decided it was past time to test a few spells in real conditions.”

Despite herself, Penelope couldn’t help but shiver at the sight of those green eyes. There were two wands providing light, and yet the livid green eyes looked like they were on fire and able to illuminate the stands and everything nearby. There was power in those irises and pupils, and much as Penelope wanted to convince herself this was just her imagination, there were plenty of reasons to think otherwise.

“As long as the rules aren’t broken, I suppose it’s fine,” given how the Potter Heiress always seemed to know the limits and the exceptions of certain laws, the Head Girl had no doubts the younger Ravenclaw had diligently searched if casting dangerous spells in the abandoned Quidditch field was authorised or not. “This is preparation for the second preliminary?”

While technically the nature of the task was a secret, plenty of rumours and gossip had spread from the Badger’s Common Room to Ravenclaw Tower, and only a blind and deaf person could have been able to ignore them.

“In part,” the Basilisk-Slayer said with a slight nod. “I’m sure plenty of Herbology knowledge will be required, but when an unknown plant is too aggressive...well, ‘kill it with fire’ is certainly the fastest and less risky solution I was able to find.”

The dark-haired girl breathed out against the tip of her wand like she was a gunner of the Far West.

“But the second preliminary isn’t what I wanted to discuss with you.” Penelope supposed this was true enough; for a topic which was a favourite of the students, their Common Room or the dorms would have been far more appropriate. “Have you made your choice about the Quills’ shop idea?”

She had. And while she wasn’t ready to acknowledge it in public, a part of her was glad someone else besides Professor Flitwick was recognising her talents. Potential employers like the Ministry and Guild senior Masters were closing their doors and beginning to deliver long-rehearsed excuses the moment they realised she was a Muggle-born.

“I am willing to accept. However, I am not really prepared to open a joke by myself on such short notice.” Persistent rumours said the Weasley Twins would be soon, but Penelope was not the infernal Twin Terrors. To begin with, there was only one of her. “I will likely need one year before any opening. And I don’t intend to limit myself to your Rune-Quills.”

She had not expected protestations and she received none. Instead the green-eyed Ravenclaw began to play with blue flames...with nothing but her hands. This was definitely *new*.

“If you truly want it, go ahead with it. As long as you have the proper parchment signed and the NEWTs to prove your skill, it’s fine. One of the big reasons I don’t want to stay in a shop is the fact it’s repetitive. If you feel the same way, try it. It’s best to not have too many regrets.”

“There is still the problem of funds.”

This brought a reaction all right.

“You realise, I think, I’m ready to invest more in you than in many business projects which have already been activated. Four thousand Galleons isn’t a small sum.”

This was not a full confirmation the Exiled Queen was financially supporting the Twin Terrors, but it was extremely close.

“I will need to build stock, and the specialised materials and tools for basic Rune-work are extremely expensive. Plus, I will probably have to hire an assistant a few months before the opening...and of course open a workshop by July.”

“How much?” asked the wealthy Heiress.

“Ten thousand Galleons,” the Head Girl prepared herself for a gentle dismissal, “and I want thirty percent of the shop’s ownership.”

“Ten thousand Galleons,” Alexandra Potter blandly commented. Of course, with the four million it was rumoured Dumbledore had been forced to hand to her, ten thousand was not that much, but it was still a very big sum. “If you ask for this pile of gold, there will be conditions...and I will expect great deeds from you.”

“Yes,” without money, no shop, no opportunities...and Penelope would be more or less required to cross the Channel to find some work which wasn’t low-paid, physically exhausting, and with no hope of promotion towards higher spheres. “I’m willing to start the business by owl-mail at first in 1995.”

The Basilisk-slayer watched her for several seconds. Penelope did her best not to flinch under this dangerous emerald gaze.

“You were about the only Prefect willing to help me in first year...I will give you your chance.” It was a true relief. “You will receive four thousand Galleons as a first payment in June. The other six thousand Galleons will be delivered after an inspection in August 1994. I reserve myself the right to veto the choice of your future assistant. And assuming I need your expertise during the inter-school tournament, I will give you bonuses to compensate for the hours and research. I will own fifty-one percent of the business; Susan Bones and Daphne will have twenty percent each. You will have nine percent.”

This was lower than she had asked, but Penelope Clearwater was not going to try to bargain upwards. It had not been mentioned, but there was little doubt the trio was going to finance the whole endeavour...and Penelope had no money to help, just her mind and her skills. And Alexandra and her partners could easily find someone else if they really wanted.

“The terms are acceptable,” the seventh-year said carefully. Unless she was wrong, the veto was more to discourage certain unfriendly parties from stealing some ideas and finished designs. “But I’m not sure how you expect me to be useful during the inter-school Tournament...”

“I’m not sure either,” the green eyes had a sort of wild beauty in the middle of the snow, “but I prefer to have a responsible Ravenclaw as part of my council than accepting a Dumbledore appointee. Oh, and the meeting with the lawyers and my guardian will be in two weeks at Zabini Manor.”

**12 February 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

In hindsight, using the Quidditch pitch two days ago had been one of her best decisions of the year. Alexandra hadn’t known the second preliminary was going to be held there, evidently, but now that she had the ‘modifications’ in front of her it was obvious that for the next few weeks no one was going to use the stadium for anything related to Quidditch or other extra-curricular activities.

“Has someone bet with the Weasley Twins that the preliminary was going to take place in a giant greenhouse here?” the third-year Ravenclaw asked, only to be met by negative expressions.

“I certainly didn’t,” Morag replied. “Hermione?”

The bushy-haired Ravenclaw shook her head.

“There was nothing two days ago, I didn’t think erecting the greenhouse and preparing the terrain was something our Professors could do.”

“I think this was a reasonable assumption,” Cho Chang commented as the five Ravenclaw Champions observed what had been a place to play the wizards’ favourite sport but now had more in common with a South American temple infested with dangerous flora. “Unless Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall have Italian friends in their relations, I think half of the witches and wizards who have participated in the preparations were hired by the Scuola Regina.”

“This is a bit exciting, no, oh Dark Lady?” Fred winked as he rushed out of the door usually reserved to Quidditch players with a crimson robe and a golden ‘F’ scintillating on his chest.

“Exciting and worrying,” the Basilisk-Slayer recognised, deciding to ignore the par for course Dark Lady title. “They only had two days and Professor Sprout...and I think half a dozen Ministry junior clerks to help them. What are they going to come up with for the *real* Tournament?”

On the plus side, this preliminary and the Tournament next school year were going to be, as Fred had said, exciting. On the minus side, the dangerous flora of Amazonia was no joke. And this was for a preliminary, not the real challenges.

“I see many silver trumpets, mind-fogging creepers, yellow flytraps and camouflage barb-roses.”

Now that she thought about it, maybe there was a need for a flower equivalent classification to the XXX dangerous creatures.

“You forgot the illusionary vine,” Hermione declared.

“It is going to be fun...for the spectators,” Roger Davies said weakly.

Alexandra smiled.

“Come on Roger, none of these plants and flowers are lethal...provided you have generous quantities of counter-poisons within the day.” These were magical species, but they preyed on small animals and insects. Whatever toxins this vegetation was able to throw at them, it would give plenty of time for Professor Snape and his assistants to save them.

“It’s still night and day compared to the first preliminary,” the sixth-year boy replied in an offended tone.

“On this point, great Captain of Ravenclaw, we are perfectly in agreement,” George jumped –metaphorically and literally – to arrive in the conversation. His clothes were exactly the same as his brother, save the large ‘G’ where the ‘F’ was shining for Fred. “To start with, today we are participating!”

If anything, it didn’t reassure Roger Davies that much. Alexandra could understand him. At the best of times, the Twins were funny and brilliant. But it was a brilliance someone intelligent wanted to keep at a large distance from oneself. And it wasn’t the case today.

The Exiled had assumed – rather logically – that the House preliminaries were going to happen one after the other, with Ravenclaw likely opening the series and Gryffindors ending it. But they had all been summoned together in the ‘Champion’s zone’.

Yes, it was a grandiose term for a very large tent at the entrance of the stadium-sized greenhouse.

But then the tent had to be magically expanded, because five Ravenclaws, nine Slytherins, twenty-seven Gryffindors and twenty-five Hufflepuffs were arriving one by one in the ‘Champion’s zone’. This wasn’t the entire population of Hogwarts, but sixty-six teenagers was a respectable number...if you ignored the Lions and the Badgers provided the majority of the members.

“Are you ready to suffer your first defeat, Potter?” Zacharias Smith sneered, his mouth running with his arrogance as rapidly as ever. “You will be outnumbered twenty-five to five this time.”

Alexandra gave the Hufflepuff her best ‘innocent smile’.

“Twenty-four opponents just for me? Zacharias, I thank you with all my heart, but Yule and Christmas were in December...”

The pure-blood’s face went redder as two-thirds of the participants – including plenty of Badgers – laughed and snickered.

“You will smile less in an hour,” the Smith Heir gritted between his teeth and a furious expression on his visage.

Alexandra did her best to not laugh. Did Smith really think they played in the same league? If so, he was going to have a few surprises. Anyway, the arrival of Susan in the tent put the ‘Heir of Hufflepuff’ to a very minor preoccupation, and the Ravenclaw witch was going to welcome her girlfriend when the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports made his entrance.

“Good morning!” The Exiled had long debated on what sort of drugs the ex-Beater was breathing in the morning to smile and behave like this, and they’d been unable to arrive to a definite conclusion. “I see everyone is there! Excellent! Excellent!”

For the next three minutes, Alexandra, Morag, and Hermione did their best to tone down the small talk and everything coming out from the commentator’s mouth. It was only when the man in canary-coloured robes told them ‘the second preliminary will begin in fifteen minutes’ that her friends and she began anew to listen to Ludovic Bagman’s ramblings.

“As you have probably guessed, every student will compete at the same time! Every potential Champion will have the opportunity to prove his valour in front of thousands of spectators!”

Thousands of spectators...it may be a bit exaggerated. The transparent magical material separating the Amazonian greenhouse from the outside wall was making it difficult to make a proper count, but she was not going to bet there were more than two thousand people sitting in the stands, students and Professors included.

Nevertheless, the tension increased a lot. Ravenclaws and Slytherins were taking it calmly, having experienced the cold of the Black Lake, but the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were stressed, nervous, and a lot of emotions which would have been fascinating to photography.

“Your challenge for this task will be...to defy the perilous obstacles of the Temple of Plants!”

The gesticulations of Lockhart couldn’t have been more ridiculous if he tried. But for now, this could be ignored. The ‘Temple of Plants’ couldn’t.

Several large trenches had been dug into the soil of the Quidditch terrain, and a lot of them could be crossed over by wooden bridges covered in illusionary vines, infamous for tricking the vision of everyone who was close to them. Behind them waited the mind-fogging creepers and other unpleasant surprises.

“To emerge victorious from this trial, you will have to return here with your Jewel of Victory!” Several heads peaked up at ‘jewel’, only to be very disappointed when the judge-commentator raised a snow globe which could have been sold in a tourist shop. “You are all going to be assigned a number by my assistants. You have to recover the jewel carved with the same number hidden in the Temple of Plants!”

Alexandra rolled her shoulders. The principle of this preliminary was not complicated. Of course, accomplishing the task ahead and fighting all the other participants at the same time wasn’t going to be simple...

“Naturally, it is absolutely forbidden to fight your fellow champions!” Bagman’s voice stopped plenty of whispers and muttered conversations in their tracks. Some faces looked outright mutinous. “This task was prepared to test your knowledge of Herbology and how skilled you are at handling dangerous flowers and plants. We do not want to see rivalries settled by pushing your opponents into the traps of the Temple of Plants! Doing so will result in an immediate disqualification!”

Alexandra was handed a card with a big ‘26’ on it by a red-haired Ministry official.

“Good luck,” she told Hermione and Morag next to her, who had received the ‘15’ and ‘42’ numbers.

“You too,” her red-haired friend murmured as Alexandra began to hop and warm up her muscles. “Something to add to our preparations?”

“No. If it becomes too dangerous, kill it with fire.”

There were more instructions, of course. Bagman loved the sound of his own voice, and the Ministry of Magic loved to create rules for rules’ sake. Honestly, who was going to get drunk or drink forbidden Potions in a preliminary like this one? Assuming they knew how to brew them – and given the large army of Gryffindors participating, that wasn’t a given at all – having Potions in your blood during a trial like this one was incredibly dangerous because many of the substances gave feelings of overconfidence and altered your senses.

“The time limit to accomplish this task is two hours! May the qualities and the strength of the Founders be with you today! Every champion to the starting line!” An order which was more difficult to accomplish than one thought, for the magical red line was barely large enough to receive twenty-plus students in width. Still, Alexandra was in the first line...unfortunately she and Davies were the only ones to have achieved this in the mob’s disorder.

Bagman had disappeared from view, but mere seconds later they all heard his amplified voice thunder over the stadium.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! WELCOME TO THE SECOND TASK OF THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE EUROPEAN MAGICAL TOURNAMENT!”

Contrary to the first trial, the applauses made it look like they were in a true competition.

“TODAY ALL THE BRAVE HOGWARTS CHAMPIONS WILL COMPETE TOGETHER! THEY WILL CHALLENGE THE MYSTERIES AND THE THORNS OF THE TEMPLE OF PLANTS!”

Alexandra was unhappy to notice that the Gryffindor on her left was Cormac McLaggen. She was going to have to raise a shield quick once they began to run. Judges’ disqualification or not, she didn’t trust the Lion not to curse her in the back.

“THEY HAVE TWO HOURS TO RECOVER THE JEWEL OF VICTORY WITH THEIR NUMBER IN THE TEMPLE! IF THEY ASK FOR THE HELP OF HERBOLOGY HANDLERS, THEY WILL BE ADMINISTERED ANTIDOTES AND DELIVERED FROM PLANT’S EMBRACE, BUT THEY WILL RECEIVE AN HOUR OF PENALTY!”

It was best to avoid taking a plunge in the Amazon bushes, herbs, and vines, then.

“ON MY MARK...5...4...3...2...1...GO!”

Alexandra did not waste her time and began to run at ‘GO’ like everyone else...and after three seconds she began to cast her spells.

“Protego Orbis Movere!” Usually she wouldn’t have bothered with a shield. Unfortunately, in battle-circumstances she hadn’t sixty potential opponents on her heels eager to slow her down with a jinx or a hex.

Three seconds later, two Stunners and four low-level third-year spells hit her magical barrier but failed to pierce it.

Some days, the Gryffindors were really as predictable as the Slytherins.

Alexandra did not stop to see who had tried to attack. With any chance, Morag or Hermione had seen them, or the judges had. If the former, there would be retribution after the preliminary. If the latter, a disqualification would serve those idiots right.

She reached the first bridge in first place with several meters of advance. Running several times per week and assimilating the first head of the Hydra had bolstered her endurance and her physical abilities.

“Incendio!” The Fire-Making Charm consumed enough of the vines to dissipate the illusions of beasts and snakes on the bridge, but it was sufficiently low-powered to not cause damage to the wooden structure.

A good jump and Alexandra was over the bridge. She had not even needed to slow down.

Five seconds later the first serious obstacle tried to attack her. Three metres tall and with a particularly unfriendly maw, this was a yellow flytrap. Except this variety of flytrap was so big it often ate small animals and didn’t disdain more juicy meat for its lunches.

“Confringo!”

The maw of the carnivorous plant received flames and an explosion at the same time, and realised it was better to not oppose her progress.

The next plants placed to block the champions didn’t cause her any trouble. Mind-fogging creepers could not overwhelm her partially attuned hydra’s senses, and the camouflage barb-roses were scorched by a couple of Lacarnum Inflamari.

Alexandra heard loud screams and vociferations behind her, spell fire as well, but she didn’t look back. Her friends could largely deal with these third-rate threats, and while this preliminary wasn’t dangerous, it paid to stay focused. In the Tournament next year, there would be little margin for mistakes and errors of concentration.

Quickly, she raced towards the Temple of Plants and began to climb up the ancient stairs, repairing the stones to make sure they could bear her weight and alternatively burning the trees, the vines, the grass, and the flowers throwing barbs, fruits, and many potential weapons.

The first bombardment failed, but Alexandra was forced to cancel the shield, it was eating too much of her energy and evasion was a better option.

“Fulgur in Comburo! Wingardium Leviosa! Fulgur in Comburo!” This time she didn’t cast the Fire-Lightning spell to hatch a baby dragon, but to open her way into the upper section of the stairs. It was like an infestation of Amazonian plants. The more you burned, the more they were coming. Even levitating the burning wood and throwing it into the oncoming flower horde didn’t force them to retreat.

Alexandra reminded herself to avoid the Amazonian forest in the next years. Paradise islands on the Brazilian coast made good holidays locations. The interior of the South American continent and its magical hinterlands didn’t.

When she reached the top of the stairs, the Ravenclaw witch couldn’t avoid looking back, but was instantly reassured. Roger Davies and Cedric Diggory were fighting against flytraps near the bottom of the stairs, and they were by far the more advanced of the participants.

Not wasting any more time, Alexandra entered the temple and in the next seconds had to fight more and more black vines and some kinds of aggressive lianas. Thank the Morrigan, she didn’t need any Lumos to see in the darkness, shifting her eyes to those of the hydra was good enough for her, but it was irritating.

The worst part was the certainty that the plants and the traps were resetting behind her. Whatever awaited her on the way to recover the snow globe, pardon the ‘jewel of victory’, she would have to do it again on the return trip...though maybe other champions would have caught up and permanently eliminated the dangerous flora by then.

The corridor filled with darkness led to a vast cavern. The temperature inside the construction was far lower than it should be for a tropical ritual location, and the humidity levels were high.

There were a few candles providing a meagre illumination, but it was evident why.

The scintillating objects they had to bring back to the finish line were there. Unfortunately, so was an old acquaintance.

“Devil’s Snare...” Alexandra would lie if she said she had missed this mass of soft and springy tendrils since her first year.

Yes, the damp atmosphere and the lack of lights made far, far more sense.

Alexandra breathed out before casting her first fire war-spell in combat condition.

“Helios Iraes!”

The incantation projected an attack which was as much fire as it was light. In other words, it was incredibly effective against the hundreds of tentacle-like appendages of the plant.

This Devil’s Snare was maybe five times bigger than the one which had once been guarding the path to the false Philosopher’s Stone, but it was not large enough to be immune to the multiple piercing rays of fire-light striking it. It shrieked, it made plenty of noises...but it moved out of the way.

Finding the orb with a ‘26’ on it did not take long. Less than thirty seconds later, Alexandra was back at the entrance of the cavern, her ‘jewel’ in her right hand and her wand in her left.

The corridor was not simpler to pass through than the first time around. In fact, it looked like the black plants had grown at a tremendous rate. Five Incendio Charms were necessary to incinerate the biggest tides of attacks, and more blue and yellow flames burned the traps on the floor and the ceilings.

Alexandra left the darkness of the temple only to re-emerge in front of the ready wands of Cedric Diggory and Angelina Johnson.

“I am not one of the plants you’re looking for,” the green-eyed Ravenclaw deadpanned and threw another Incendio behind her because the plants did not stop attacking when you felt safe.

“You’ve already found your globe?” the Hufflepuff Prefect’s expression was one to remember for ages.

“Yep. And for the record, I think your Head of House has an unhealthy fascination on Devil’s Snare.”

“I can deal with Devil’s Snare, as long as it’s a small one,” the Gryffindor Chaser tried to show a brave face. Something on Alexandra’s visage must have warned her, because her next question was far more hesitant.

“It’s a small one, isn’t it?”

“It was filling half of the cavern and a good Helios’ Wrath is enough to repel it,” Alexandra told her. Johnson wasn’t part of Cormac McLaggen’s friends, and honestly it hadn’t been mentioned anywhere you couldn’t help fellow competitors. “Good luck, you may need it!”

Descending the stairs proved an arduous chore. There were more and more students throwing spells everywhere to get rid of the Amazonian plants, and most of them had no good spell discipline...or they were losing it once they were lightly injured.

Roger Davies was near the top, but his left leg was bleeding and in general his clothes were in pitiful state. Morag, Cho, and Hermione were in the next group, with the Twins.

“Do the judges authorise prank items?” Alexandra asked as Fred and George threw prank-boxes on a poor flytrap which vanished to transform itself into a large red rabbit.

“I think we failed to read the rules, George.”

“Quite right, Fred. But you have to admit, my ugly brother, this task is funnier our way!”

“Absolutely!”

The Potter Heiress began to run again, though she took a less direct path than the one she had used to reach the stairs. The greenhouse had become a true battlefield, and while some students weren’t fighting each other, they were hurling insults at each other. For a couple of seconds, the Basilisk-Slayer wondered if the pheromones or the illusions were playing mischievous tricks on everyone’s brain before deciding this was of no matter. Alexandra cast a powerful Incendio at a moving bush which was going to attack Susan and Hannah from behind, blew a kiss to her girlfriend when she looked in her direction and then ran to the bridges.

The Ravenclaw third-year laughed quite loudly when she saw Zacharias Smith had apparently been one of the early victims, and now the handlers of the trial were trying to unstick him from a large sticky plant at the bottom of the trench.

The finish line was shining in bright colours of red, blue, yellow, and green, and Alexandra jumped it with a fist raised in triumph. Immediately she could hear the voice of Ludo Bagman once more. Evidently, all the noises and sights were only one-way during the task.

“MISS ALEXANDRA POTTER OF RAVENCLAW WINS THE SECOND PRELIMINARY IN TEN MINUTES AND THIRTY-ONE SECONDS! ABSOLUTELY OUTSTANDING!”

The young green-eyed teenager took a second to understand that the loud thunder was the noise of people cheering and applauding for her. It was...it felt good.

Alexandra bowed largely and saluted, something that increased the acclamations of the spectators. And then she was escorted away to Madam’s Pomfrey provisional infirmary, despite her wishes to see how the rest of the preliminary was going to end.

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Precisely three hours and seven minutes later, the great screen-line panel of the judges lit with the results of the preliminary task, interrupting momentarily what was in Alexandra’s opinion a superb victory party.

Professor Flitwick and several fifth-years students had brought bottles of Butterbeer and a lot of food which was in the process of being drunk and eaten respectively. Since they were in a greenhouse with exceptionally hot temperatures and the dangerous plants were moved away or outright burned by the specialists, why not profit from it?

Some Gryffindors and Slytherins had looked at them with disapproving expressions, but this was just because they were sore losers.

Without surprise, she was in first place.

*Alexandra Potter – 99 points – 10 min 31s*

“Damn...perfection once again isn’t mine.” If it happened once more, the black-haired teenage witch was going to be suspicious.

“Pff...you have what...more than sixty points of advance over Roger?” Morag winked.

“Closer to seventy,” Hermione corrected, her bushy hair in a sorry state as they had been targeted by a particularly aggressive and violent barbed-wine.

*Angelina Johnson – 70 points*

*Cedric Diggory – 68 points*

*Roger Davies – 62 points*

*Cho Chang – 57 points*

*Morag MacDougal – 54 points*

*Hermione Granger – 50 points*

*Fred Weasley – 50 points*

*George Weasley – 50 points*

*Neville Longbottom – 45 points*

“The strategy ‘killing it with fire’ has evidently been a great success,” Fred pompously announced in an extremely amusing parody of his eldest brother Percival.

“Your triumph is total, oh great and mighty Dark Lady,” George added. “Is there something you want to reveal to your lovely minions?”

“It was an excellent warm-up for the real Tournament,” their primary investor and benefactor answered while she read the scores. “I see there are a lot of people disqualified for this task.”

“McLaggen, Goyle, Derrick, and Pete Balsall tried to curse you several times, and they weren’t exactly discreet about it. There are a lot of Hufflepuffs who immediately fell to the first traps and abandoned in the first minutes. Malone, Stebbins, Cholderton, Tuckett...I think half of the Badgers didn’t reach the temple’s stairs. And of course many Slytherins and Gryffindors threw hexes and jinxes at each other. But if one judge saw you...”

And the judges had seen it and been ruthless. Dumbledore may prefer the Gryffindors to the three other Houses, but rules were rules, and breaking them in front of at least a thousand spectators would be very bad publicity.

*Malcolm Preece – 43 points*

*Heidi Macavoy – 41 points*

*Alicia Spinnet – 37 points*

*George Hooper – 33 points*

*Eurig Cadwallader – 29 points*

*Katie Bell – 27 points*

*Cassius Warrington – 23 points*

*Leo Black – 21 points*

*Kenneth Towler – 20 points*

*Susan Bones – 20 points*

*Tamsin Applebee – 19 points*

*Graham Montague – 18 points*

*Ronald Weasley – 15 points*

*Tracey Davis – 10 points*

*Blaise Zabini – 5 points*

Overall, twenty-five students had earned points in the second preliminary. Well, secondary preliminary task for the Ravenclaws and the Slytherins. For the two other Houses, it was just the first task and that meant nothing was truly decided, even if Angelina Johnson and Cedric Diggory had taken a large advantage with their second and third place today.

“Two tasks done, two more to go...”

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

There were many prestigious offices in the Ministry of Magic. And if the common wizard or witch was asked the question ‘does the Department of Magical Law Enforcement include many prestigious positions?’ the answer would be yes in all likelihood. The participants may even mention the Auror Office, the Office of Improper Magical Use, and the Wizengamot.

Tobias Stiles was not working in one of these prestigious offices.

And when one wondered if he wasn’t exaggerating his stories too many times, he could always answer his work place wasn’t on Level 2 like the rest of the DMLE, but on Level 12. In other words, Tobias and several other unfortunate Ministry employees were on the level of the archives, and sometimes they felt as useful as the mountain of parchments and other documentation that regularly ended up there and that no one would ever read again.

Tobias Stiles wasn’t an Auror, a Hit-Wizard, a Wizengamot member, a Judge, or a Procurator. He was the Head of the Office of Magical Wills and Inheritances.

The seventy-year-old wizard was sure someone was going to exclaim ‘but that’s an important job!’ and tell him to not complain about his ‘luck’.

Unfortunately, it was anything but. Oh, maybe a century or two ago the position he currently occupied had been doing the very job it was supposed to. In other words, arbitrating the inheritance quarrels, searching for the true Lords and Ladies to take their Rings and be elevated to the stations they deserved, detecting the counterfeit wills, and signalling to the Aurors the wizards and witches they suspected of acting suspiciously.

But the Office of Magical Wills and Inheritances had long been emptied of any real power. The Wizengamot had long made sure of that! Law after law, Ministry order by Ministry order, the powers of the Department had been given to other offices or outright seized by the Wizengamot in blatant power grabs.

The Office had not been officially disbanded or amalgamated with another third-rate Department. For all its lack of prestige, the DMLE had not been willing to relinquish any part of its authority, as minor as some of these fragments were. And the parchment-work of the Office still had to be done, in the meantime. This was something the Wizengamot had not wanted to take care of.

So in theory, Tobias Stiles’ boss was still the Head of the DMLE, one Director Rufus Scrimgeour.

In practise, he hadn’t even been invited as one of the Office Heads by the new Director when Amelia Bones had been fired and the ‘Crippled Lion’ was elevated to replace her. This gave a good idea of how important his office was.

A carillon rang out a few corridors away, prompting Tobias to look at his watch. Strange. His sole-and-only clerk had been given a day off to visit his ill father in Ireland, and only four other people were working on this level. All of them were busy somewhere in the Archives right now.

The bald employee thought about it for a moment, before shrugging and deciding it was certainly a trickster or someone who had been somehow sent to the wrong place by the Security Office.

He seized another file that maybe, just maybe, the Wizengamot would bother reading in one or two years...and stopped, as Lady Narcissa Malfoy entered his office.

“Lady Malfoy! An unexpected honour! Please take a seat, take a seat!”

Deep inside, Tobias was panicking. As much as he wanted to convince himself otherwise, having the wife of the Dark Traditionalists’ leader in his office was certainly not going to be restful. There was no way a Lady of her status went to Level 12 ‘by accident’.

Tobias had stood up by reflex, and waited until the beautiful blonde-haired witch was well-installed before sitting again. He couldn’t help but feel a tinge of envy at the green-gold robe and her enticing pale skin. Some pure-bloods had the money, the looks, and the girls...

“How can the Office of Magical Wills and Inheritances be of help to you today, Lady Malfoy?” Tobias asked out loud, dismissing these dangerous thoughts. “I am unaware of any wills and inheritances the Most Noble House of Malfoy may be interested in...”

“I want to see the will of my grand-aunt, Lady Cassiopeia Black.”

Tobias sweated. Suddenly the presence of Lady Malfoy alone was far more worrying than in his worst nightmares.

“I have not the will here, and I think, with due respect, you are aware of it, my Lady. It was sealed on...” consulting the register of sealed documents by the order of the Chief Warlock took less than thirty seconds, “...on September 27, 1992, by personal order of Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore and Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge.”

“Yes,” agreed the wife of the ‘Imperiused’ Death Eater Lord Lucius Malfoy. “But since Lady Cassiopeia Black was never accused of violating any Ministry laws to my knowledge, never went to a trial, and was never a Death Eater, the Ministry of Magic and the Chief Warlock have not the authority to seal a will forever.”

Tobias Stiles saw where this was going, and there was nothing but trouble on this path.

“I... I agree with you, at least where the law is concerned. I’m afraid I can’t speculate or reveal the reasons having pushed Minister Cornelius Fudge and Chief Warlock Dumbledore to have given such an order, of course.”

“Of course,” the Malfoy witch said with a smirk. This was a lie...they both knew why it had been done. The Black Files were one of the very, very nasty secrets of the Wizengamot everyone loved to pretend had never existed in the first place.

“But essentially, you are correct. The Chief Warlock and/or the Ministry of Magic had, according to Article 37, one year one month and one day to pass a vote in front of the Wizengamot to confirm the sealing of the will. If they didn’t...”

His hands trembled. If the people involved in the affair were in the wrong, the fines were proportional to the wealth value of the vaults sealed for over a year. As today’s date was February 14, 1994, they were getting close to one year and a half since Cassiopeia Black’s will had disappeared from sight.

And somehow, Tobias doubted a Black in recent history had ever been considered *poor*.

The Head of the Office was suddenly very aware there were far worse things than waiting for your career to end in a half-forgotten Ministry level. Having your name cited in what promised to be the ‘trial of the year’ next to the Chief Warlock Albus bloody Dumbledore himself and the Minister of Magic to raise the stakes was not how he wanted to become famous.

“There are ways to avoid any unpleasant repercussions, of course,” his treacherous voice took a pleading tone.

“Yes,” the tone he was replied was falsely innocent. “If the DMLE Director at the moment the will was sealed is willing to testify all was done according to the rules, the charges will be abandoned. The Head of House Black can also cancel the entire procedure, provided his word-given oaths are strong enough to convince a jury of his peers, or failing that, he has in his possession documents proving the will’s writer trusted him.”

The Ministry employee saw the jaws of the trap close in an impeccable manner. The DMLE Director at the moment the will had been sealed away had been Amelia Bones. Given how badly Fudge and Dumbledore had treated her during the Azkaban affair, the chances of the Bones Regent giving the Minister and the Chief Warlock this favour were non-existent.

As for the Head of House Black, he was too notorious even in the depths of the Ministry to ignore the traditions and the rules he didn’t like. Some Lords and employees may work or ally with him, but no one was going to swear on his or her magic that the Lord Black’s oaths meant something. And since Cassiopeia Black had maybe trusted three or four people in Britain and one of them was the woman in front of him, the Lord Black wasn’t going to find documents to save his skin. Merlin and Morgana, if Sirius Black had participated in the will in the first place, he may even be condemned with the other accused parties.

Tobias felt nauseous. This was not a plan created in one or two days, or in one week. This was a meticulous and deliberate political manoeuvre, and perhaps it had begun before Cassiopeia Black held her last breath. If the rumours were true, the Black matriarch was capable of it.

Anyway, it was too late and he was forced to do his job.

“No Wizengamot vote exists to enforce Article 37 and the will of Lady Cassiopeia Black remains unavailable to this Office. The assets, vaults, heirlooms, and other possessions have been frozen since September 27, 1992,” the Head of the Office of Wills and Inheritances said for the records. “Do you wish to open pursuits against the parties who gave these unlawful commands?”

**Author’s note**: It’s funny sometimes how trying to remove a problem from public sight can return to stab you in the back while you’ve all but forgotten about it...

And if there’s one House which can give you reason to curse while they’re long dead and buried, House Black is indeed this House...