**Chapter 80**

**Power isn’t everything**

**20 July 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

Alexandra emptied three glasses of water before asking the important question.

“Where are I am lacking, Professor?”

After serving as a punching-ball for her Head of House five times in a row, it was quite evident the green-eyed Ravenclaw was inferior in a lot of domains compared to him.

“You aren’t lacking per se,” the former Duellist Champion smiled. “Save in one thing, which is experience.”

Alexandra raised a dubious eyebrow, unimpressed by the explanation.

“You have a faster casting rate than I, Professor.”

“Because you think too much about the spells you want to use for a given situation,” the tiny Charms Professor immediately countered. “To put it in simpler terms, you don’t have enough experience, so you think too much. And you likely need more time to be used to your Animagus vitality. You were always on the move and presenting a far more difficult challenge than in your first year, but your agility and your technique of spell-evasion can still improve a lot.”

“I see.”

“Don’t be discouraged,” the Head of House Ravenclaw said. “You are far more dangerous as an opponent, as I said before this. I don’t need to hold back much of my repertoire or my skill when facing you anymore. There are no other students at Hogwarts who can boast about that, at least not without making liar of themselves.”

“The compliments are appreciated,” Alexandra winced, not bothering to hide it from her teacher. “It’s just...well, it’s arrogant, but...after surviving everything I have and fighting powerful enemies, I thought I was closer to you in power and skill than I am.”

“In power, you are above me,” the half-goblin replied in earnest, “your magical core is already superior to mine, and the gap is likely going to widen, not narrow in the next years. But this rapid growth of your core has resulted in a lack of mastery in your magical output. You have taken plenty of steps to correct it, but I estimate you will need two or three years to arrive at a point where the energy poured into a spell is minimally wasted. This is also partly why I can afford to play a long duel against you.”

“The other reason being experience, right?”

“Correct, Miss Potter.”

Alexandra watched the blue sky for several seconds before shaking her head. Well, it could be worse. Many of her friends had tried to dig up if several of the other Champions had participated in national or international tournaments, and the answers had all come back negative. A majority of the Durmstrang boys and girls were assiduous members of their Duelling class, but they would neither have the decades of experience nor the duellist memories Professor Filius Flitwick had built since he was a teenager.

“At least this cured me of my arrogance.”

“You aren’t arrogant, Miss Potter” her Professor immediately disabused her. “In fact, I would say that of all the twenty students selected to participate in the Tournament, you are the one who sees with the greatest clarity your strengths and your weaknesses. You also try to correct this state of affairs, which is a very good thing. What you can’t control, is that I am in many ways one of the worst opponents for you.”

“How so?” Alexandra asked curiously.

“As you have already mentioned, I am faster than you, though I expect this to change very soon,” the Charms Master elaborated. “Using this strength, I make it quite impossible for you to use any form of Runic-casting or any other form of magic which needs preparations. You are also quite gifted in Charms, easily able to use fourth and fifth-year spells. But I am a Charms Master for a reason, so this is a field you are still going to be outclassed in for several years.”

Yes, the black-haired girl understood his point...in hindsight, she relied a lot on Charms and Runes...but then out of the core classes, Astronomy and History were useless for Duelling. Herbology could have its use if you wanted to organise an ambush in an arena similar to the Temple of Plants. And quite evidently, Alexandra had not brewed a single Potion for this little session. This left DADA and Transfiguration, and the former she used extensively via elemental war spells. As for the latter...

“I would suggest for your next lesson you learn the Silencing Charm.”

“Of course,” the soon-to-be Ravenclaw fourth year answered automatically before frowning. “Though given the level of the opposition at the Tournament, the Beauxbatons Champions and those of the other European schools will have likely mastered silent casting.”

“You never know who is able to cast non-verbally until you’ve silenced him or her,” the former professional Duellist smiled fondly, likely remembering a good memory or two of a past duel. “Many great wizards and witches often took the easiest path in the name of expediency, and found themselves defenceless when unable to properly articulate an incantation. My advice is: don’t imitate them. If you want to be a great witch, there can’t be any corner cutting.”

If anything, this didn’t reassure Alexandra at all.

“One might argue I cut a lot of corners by mastering the Animagus form of a Lernaean Hydra, Professor.”

“Nonsense, absolute nonsense,” the Charms Professor chided her. “You didn’t cut corners; you cheated all the way. And as everyone intelligent knows, the mysteries of magic are so unfair that any advantage you can grab by luck or skill is to be exploited mercilessly.”

The Head of Ravenclaw gave her a little tap on the arm before beginning to walk away.

“The Tri-Wizard Tournament was infamous because it was all about cheating. As its spiritual successor, I would be extremely surprised to hear the European Magical Tournament will be any different. Cheating is fine for such an event like this...provided you do not get caught.”

The Ravenclaw Champion knew the smile on her Professor’s lips.

“You really want the trophy to be exhibited for a year or two in your office, don’t you?”

“Guilty as charged,” her Head of House answered. “Guilty as charged.”

**23 July 1994, Longbottom Manor, England**

“I’m going to say loudly what everyone thinks,” Angelina Johnson said after clearing her throat. “We aren’t talented enough to correctly brew Potions. And this Potions tutor was either an imbecile or the best attempt to sabotage us I’ve ever seen.”

“Agreed,” Neville replied. “At least nothing of value was lost.”

The two standard cauldrons they had brought for the tutoring were lost, of course, but the good thing was that when you were the future Lord of a Most Noble and Ancient House, cauldrons weren’t exactly a problem to replace as long as you didn’t want them to be in silver or gold.

“I know it’s a question which shouldn’t even be asked, but are there any good Potions tutors in Britain?” Leo complained. “Seriously, the bunch of incompetents we tried can’t be all the available Potion Masters!”

“They aren’t,” Geoffrey Hooper intervened, scratching out several names with his quill on a parchment which listed the potential candidates. “But given that we are Gryffindors and some of us,” the older Gryffindor gave a half-teasing smirk at Leo, Ron, and Neville, “never made any secret as to their allegiances, there are many Masters who won’t even reply to our owls.”

“Most of the people who survive Snape’s NEWT classes are Slytherins or Ravenclaws,” Angelina Johnson said in a disgusted voice. “The Snake alumni outnumber the graduates of the other Houses ten to one, obviously.”

“And obviously, if you’re the greasy bat’s favourite, you don’t speak with the Gryffindors,” Ron snarled. “What about the Ravenclaws?”

Neville sent a disbelieving look at the red-haired boy who had once been his unconditional best friend. Had he forgotten the incident this year which had seen a good half of House Ravenclaw poisoned by flawed Zonko’s products?

“The Ravenclaws don’t hate our guts as much as the Slytherins,” the Boy-Who-Lived began, “but they haven’t forgotten the events of last autumn. A lot of parents haven’t forgotten what was done.”

And it was unlikely they had judged Ron and Leo were punished *enough*. Both were supposed to be suspended for many months, but the punishments had been enormously reduced or altered. Most inside Gryffindor House hadn’t cared too much. The Ravenclaws had very different opinions on the subject.

“What about Professor Dumbledore?” Hooper asked tentatively. “I know he’s an Alchemist, not a Potion Master, but you have to know more than the basics of NEWT Potions to learn Alchemy.”

“It won’t work,” Neville quickly shook his head, trying his best to be as detached as possible. “Professor Dumbledore told me he had no difficulties reciting Potion-making instructions by heart and expanding on the knowledge provided by it, but he is far from a good teacher in this class. There’s a reason he was teaching Transfiguration, not Potions, before becoming Headmaster.”

Deep inside, he felt a bit of guilt. When Professor Dumbledore had proposed to him at the end of June to spend a one-month-long tutoring session with him once his birthday was celebrated, Neville had immediately accepted. At the time though, no matter the instructions to keep it a big secret, the young Longbottom had really believed all the potential Gryffindor Champions had been offered this deal.

But as June died and July’s days were heading slowly but surely to an end, it was evident Hooper and Johnson had been left in the dark, while the Headmaster had invited Ron and Leo.

Neville knew Professor Dumbledore was very clever, far more than him, but...it felt...wrong, to keep the Gryffindor Champion in the dark.

“And the other Champions of Hogwarts?” Leo wasn’t willing to abandon the subject yet, it appeared. Perhaps because a lot of pranks depended on certain substances, and with Zonko bankrupted, only the Weasley Twins remained, and they weren’t as inexpensive as the famous joke shop, given that the Black Heir had everything he wanted for free before this year. “Surely they have someone to teach them Potions!”

“They have,” Angelina remarked thoughtfully. “According to the Badgers I met at the Quidditch World Cup, Diggory is tutored by a Dutch Potion Master, someone who owed Sprout a few favours. Or is it Diggory’s father who paid for it? Anyway, the pretty boy of House Hufflepuff is being tutored by someone competent. Not that he really needed it, his Potion grades were quite good this year.”

“Warrington is of course tutored by certain...associates of Snape.” Geoffrey said prudently.

“The kind who have long sleeves to hide their Dark Marks?” Leo grinned.

Neville sighed. He had hoped that the loss of his pocket money would have taught one of his former best friends some skill in diplomacy, but apparently this wasn’t the case.

“Leo, you will have to be careful.”

“Neville, don’t tell me you believe they are innocent!”

“Of course, they aren’t innocent,” Angelina said bluntly. “No one here is stupid enough to believe their excuses about the Imperius or whatever nonsense they are sprouting this year. But when we leave Hogwarts, Cassius Warrington will be recognised as the Slytherin Champion, and you aren’t the Gryffindor one. He will have diplomatic immunity, amongst other things, as long as he doesn’t do something against the rules of the Tournament.”

“And killing me outside of a task is against the rules-“

“Not at all.” As the sun was behind her, the dark skin of the Gryffindor Chaser looked even darker and more threatening to his eyes. “Did you bother reading the rules we were provided? Champions or substitute Champions of other schools can’t hurt us as long as they haven’t been provoked. Death and a whole list of infractions are forbidden no matter what happens when it is an inter-school conflict. But Champions of the same school can legally get away with murdering the substitutes. Geoffrey is forbidden to injure or kill Warrington, but if Nott annoys him too much, he can break his nose and do unpleasant things.”

“I suppose it’s all hypothetical, Angelina,” Geoffrey rolled his eyes. “I don’t have any intention to torture someone...or to break the nose of Theodore Nott, though sometimes the Snakes make it very tempting.”

“True nobility,” Neville congratulated him. “But I think Angelina was more referring to the point that there are two Champions of Hogwarts who wouldn’t be reluctant to hurt a Gryffindor or two if they had the excuse.”

Leo flinched. Ron shuddered. Yes, they really should have read the Tournament rules. A lot of it was boring reading, and it wasn’t exactly small reading, but it was...informative.

“Who tutors *her*?” The last word was articulated like there was nothing fouler in this world to the youngest Weasley boy.

“If the rumours from Hannah Abbot can be trusted, it’s the former Potion Master of Hogwarts, Horace Slughorn of Slytherin House, who tutors Alexandra Potter,” Angelina spoke, sending a warning glare to Leo and Ron. The older girl really, really didn’t like their behaviour when it came to the Black Witch.

On the one hand, Neville agreed it was somewhat fair. Leo and Ron, and to be fair a good third of House Gryffindor, hadn’t exactly covered themselves in glory during the past school year.

On the other hand, Black Witches weren’t exactly the nice kind of Dark Witches, and the last Potter had a body count which was in the double digits. And there was the delightful possibility that, knowing the laws of the Tournament better than he did, she simply awaited the Tournament to wipe the board clean of the Light Champions. Fleur Delacour hated her, and the enmity was firmly and absolutely reciprocated.

“You all met him during the Potions preliminary,” Angelina told them before adding, realising their incomprehension. “He was the one with the large moustache and he was rather...well-endowed in the belly.”

“Oh, it’s him!” Leo laughed. “I thought he was a politician who pretended to know something about Potions. He certainly isn’t a very good Potion Master, if he wasn’t able to prevent himself from becoming fat and ugly...”

**25 July 1994, MacDougal Manor, Ireland**

“You know, I look fondly upon the time when we were ignorant enough to ‘know’ Bathilda Bagshot was a senile old woman.”

“Yeah,” Alexandra replied, giving a disappointed look at the forty-plus folders she had brought with her today to MacDougal Manor and which by now had all been opened and read. “It was way funnier when we were able to joke about it...”

“It’s possible Cassiopeia invented everything,” Hermione tried weakly. Aside from Morag and she, the bushy-haired Ravenclaw had been the only one available to come today, and in several ways, Alexandra deeply regretted breaking what was left of her innocence like that.

The Black Files made for really, really ugly reading.

Alexandra stared at the former Gryffindor for several seconds.

“When you have the photos to prove your accusations, the witnesses’ testimonies, the burial sites where the corpses were disposed, and a loaded mountain of evidence, I think ‘inventing everything’ would be way simpler...and cost far fewer Galleons. The Ministry certainly sentences people to Azkaban on flimsier information.”

No, Cassiopeia Black had not woken up one good morning and decided it was grand time to shape thousands of rumours into a plausible scenario. The files of the ancient Black witch were the serious consequence of several decades of intelligence gathering, blackmail, and many, many illegal deeds.

The forty-plus files Alexandra had chosen to study today with her friends contained enough dirt to destroy the Ministry, and there was a whole library of it left in her possession.

“What are we going to do with this knowledge now?” Morag grimaced. “Merlin and Morgana, we knew Dumbledore’s past must have had dark shadows, but I didn’t think he and Grindelwald were truly *lovers*!”

Alexandra grimy nodded. Through third year, it had become evident Dumbledore and Grindelwald had been in contact with each other well before the latter decided to embark on his conquest of Europe.

Thanks to Lady Cassiopeia’s research, the Exiled knew the Headmaster of Hogwarts had been far more than a simple academic pen-pal.

No, the two had been lovers. There was enough evidence in the black-coloured folder to be assured of that.

“You’re thinking about revealing it this summer, Alex?” Hermione asked.

“No,” the Champion of the Morrigan replied with a wince. “I’m thinking about revealing it once the Tournament is over. If we reveal it now, the consequences can’t be predicted, and after the uncountable scandals he managed to survive in the last two years, I’m not betting against our Headmaster’s capacity to save his seat.”

It wasn’t in Fudge’s power to fire the ‘Defeater of Grindelwald’ anyway. It took a unanimous decision of the Board of Governors, and the Potter Heiress was far from sure they had the votes to do so.

“It’s dangerous.”

“Yes. Don’t get me wrong I’m all for defending the rights of same-sex marriage, but if this is true,” she transfigured one of her fingers into a claw and pointed it at the offending folder, “they began their relationship *after* Grindelwald had been expelled from Durmstrang. It was *after* he sacrificed one of his fellow students in a Dark Ritual!”

By the Morrigan and Hades, Alexandra wasn’t going to cast stones at any person talking with a Dark Wizard or a Dark Witch – she would have to cut her own throat to abjure her ‘sins’ – but even Lyudmila Romanov had enough self-control to not do this sort of crime within Durmstrang walls...or at least she had the cleverness to not be caught doing it.

“Don’t forget his participation in formulating Grindelwald’s ideology.” Hermione said quietly.

“It’s difficult to forget it when we have to live with the consequences every day of our life.”

Cassiopeia Black was unsure who of the dreadful duo had called for the subjugation and the enslavement of the non-magical population, who wanted first to break the stranglehold of the aristocracy, and who had uttered first the diabolic words ‘for the Greater Good’, but she had obtained enough letters – likely from Bagshot – that Dumbledore would never have gained the positions he did if this disturbing news were published in a serious newspaper or a book.

“There are some people who will say he realised what Grindelwald was, and he never tried to put it into practise.”

“Which is digging in the sand to hide from the truth,” Alexandra clicked her tongue. “They broke away from each other when Albus Dumbledore’s sister died in a three way-duel between Grindelwald and the two Dumbledore brothers.”

“The evidence for this one is pretty weak,” Hermione noted.

“Of course,” Alexandra rolled her eyes. “Even the Mistress of the Black Files can’t have much information when only three persons know of the truth, and as far as she was aware, two of them swore to bring the secret to their graves.”

And Grindelwald was dead, so assuming he told no one, this secret had mostly died with him.

However, the Ravenclaw girl had found fascinating the fact that it was not Ariana Dumbledore who was buried under the tomb marked with her name. It was ‘merely’ a Homunculus, and one created by Dark Magic.

Cassiopeia Black had hinted this may be the fingerprints of the Exchequer, and Alexandra wasn’t ready to say she was wrong.

“Dumbledore could have been the mastermind decades ago...but short of pouring enough Veritaserum to break his Occlumency shields down his throat, I doubt we will ever get a truthful confession,” Morag concluded. “The big questions are how many of his teenage years’ goals has he pursued after 1945, and how many new ones has he created after his lover’s imprisonment?”

These were two very good questions, as it happened. And the answer was...

“I think we can all agree that all we can do with our resources is speculate.” The dark-haired girl closed her eyes for three seconds before reopening them and steeling herself again. “But Dumbledore needs to go, permanently. His last title makes him necessary for the European Magical Tournament, but the moment it’s over, we deal with him.”

At the rate she was progressing, Alexandra was confident her chances wouldn’t be too bad against the former Chief Warlock, especially since she had no intention of offering him a fair duel.

“How many wizards are you going to...remove from power, Alex?”

“As many as necessary,” the Basilisk-Slayer said grimly. “But the ones who absolutely need to go are Dumbledore, Fudge, and Crouch.”

Bathilda Bagshot had not been entirely accurate in her rumours. It wasn’t watching his *wife* fornicating with other men who had led the then-DMLE Director to try to destroy the Old Ways and banning all sabbat practises; it was his *son and Heir* who had been caught in the act.

The idiot they had to call ‘Minister’ and Amelia Bones had never slept with each other, but the former had a crush on the Regent of House Bones, and had stolen enough hair to pay prostitutes to drink Polyjuice to give them her appearance and...well, Alexandra supposed what followed was as predictable as it was illegal.

The Unspeakables were, fortunately, not breeding Dementors. That was the good news, though given that Alexandra knew the demonic spectres were most likely Morgana cursing the deserters of Camlann’s armies to an eternal undeath, they may very well have tried it and failed.

On the other hand, they were not really conspiring against Ministry interests because *they didn’t consider themselves part of the Ministry in the first place*! And as much as she wanted to blame Crouch or Fudge for this one, this lack of supervision was the result of over a century of letting the employees of the Department of Mysteries get away with more and more egregious and illegal things. Seriously, when the very people who were supposed to enforce the law were not caring about it, what did it say about the situation in Britain?

The Marauders had been Animagi save one, Remus Lupin being a werewolf. The writer of the Black Files had noted he was the only Lycan or werewolf to willingly serve a Light master in Britain as far as everyone remembered. No, Britain anti-werewolf laws weren’t responsible for this. Trust the Ministry and don’t ask stupid questions.

“I would have thought you would decide upon a larger list,” Morag teased her.

“The day is still young,” Alexandra replied sarcastically. “Truthfully, if any Marauder except Pettigrew was alive today, I would designate them priority targets.”

The list of malicious pranks the Gryffindors had committed during their Hogwarts and young adult years was quite sickening.

“I have a feeling you wouldn’t do that just because they were Animagi.”

“No, I would do that because of their unrepentant Light bigotry.” Pettigrew’s choices had led him away from this path, but Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and of course her father had definitely not abandoned it. “I don’t really care if one could transform into a black dog, the other into a stag, and the last one is a rat. Though I’m surprised they went through the Animagus transformation by the Merlinian method and McGonagall didn’t notice.”

“Or she noticed and chose not to mention it to the proper authorities,” Hermione whispered.

“Do we place her on our list of enemies?”

“For the moment, no,” Alexandra breathed out loudly. “McGonagall is a die-hard supporter of Dumbledore and a member of the Order of the Phoenix, but she hasn’t done anything to me personally, and as far as Cassiopeia Black knew, her hands are clean...more or less.”

There had been a few subventions from a Light organisation passing through her hands, but compared to the things Dumbledore and some of his allies could rightfully be accused of, McGonagall was an angel. And Alexandra wasn’t going to begin killing people just because they held different political ideas than her. If the woman tried to kill her, her judgement would change, but for now the cat Animagus was off-limits.

“Now let’s discuss the interesting stuff,” Morag chuckled as she seized the compromising photos from a green folder as Alexandra’s attention had wavered away for too long. “The vampires.”

**28 July 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

“My dear Luna, you have the incredible honour to meet...Luna.”

The young snowy owl and the blonde-haired Ravenclaw stared at each other stoically for five seconds.

Then Luna, that is the witch, stopped merely looking at the bird of the same name, and proceeded to grab her before hugging the white owl. Atalanta’s daughter was so surprised by the typical behaviour of the co-redactor of the Loud Duck that there was only a muffed hoot. Luna didn’t release her grasp on her new companion though, and more caresses and hugs followed.

“Well, I think those two are settled for life,” Nigel commented, trying not to laugh at the worried glances the two other young owls waiting on their perch were throwing in the direction of the young witch carrying away their sister.

“It’s a bit early to judge,” Alexandra said for the form. “But Luna being Luna, and Luna being the owl of Luna, the result is certainly going to be...one-sided.”

“True. Okay my turn.” But as Nigel came a few fingers away from the two snowy owls, he was met with hoots of anger, wings opened, and fierce claws.

The apprentice journalist wisely took two steps back.

“I don’t think they like me very much, Alexandra.”

“I think you’re right,” the Potter Heiress confirmed before clearing her throat. “Selene! Phoebe! Is it any way to treat a guest?”

The two snowy owls immediately calmed down, but the green-eyed witch could tell the two young birds had made their choices, and they weren’t in favour of Nigel.

Fred and George chose this moment to try their chance, and if anything, the reaction was worse. Selene hooted aggressively and flapped her wings threateningly again. Phoebe outright refused to watch the red-haired twins and presented her back on them.

“I think, my ugly twin, that we failed to meet these majestic owls’ exacting standards.”

“Right you are, my ugly twin. Perhaps they didn’t like our fireworks?”

Deep inside, Alexandra was beginning to wonder what sort of teachings Atalanta had given to her owlets. They had already refused Morag and Hermione, and now-

“I am the best choice for you,” Daphne Greengrass told Selene, closing in with her icy and stern face of the Ice Queen.

“Hoot?”

“The Greengrass grounds are bigger than those of Zabini Manor,” in the background Blaise whispered they had also not been in Britain for that long, “and you will have three meals each day, along with the company of two hundred-plus owls.”

“Hoot!”

Was the Slytherin girl...trying to bribe one of her snowy owls?”

“I will use you exclusively for my correspondence with Alexandra and Zabini Manor.”

“Hoot!”

“And you will have perch and warm blanket for your personal use.”

“Hoot!”

“I promise I won’t use cages or anything to restrain your flight.”

On a final hoot, the snowy owl left her perch to land on the right shoulder of the Greengrass Heiress.

“Right, Selene is going with Daphne,” Alexandra commented before holding her left arm out in a clear invitation to Phoebe. The young owl immediately went on to land. “Phoebe, you have to choose a mistress. It’s time to leave the nest.”

As if to support her words, Atalanta went on to land on her left shoulder, and the hooting and the barking the older owl gave to her daughter were rather...loud.

“I know you don’t want to leave, but it’s time to clap your wings and discover new owleries.”

“Hoot!”

“You will be treated well, I promise. Snowy owls like you are always loved.”

The young bird seemed to realise her resolution wasn’t going to change in the next minutes and finally decided to fly on...directly to Susan’s shoulders. Of course. If there was any doubt the mail owls used by wizards and witches weren’t incredibly intelligent thanks to good genes and the magic imbued in them by centuries of experiments, this behaviour would erase the few hesitations left.

“Now that all the available snowy owls are ready for their new duties,” Alexandra drily said under the chuckles, “let’s see what sort of treat our grand party-makers, also known as Fred and George Weasley, have prepared for us in the park.”

“We live to please the Grand Lady of Ravenclaw!” the duo of pranksters chorused, bowing and gesticulating comically, inviting them to descend the grand white stairs of Zabini Manor like they were employed butlers in the palace.

“Not that I’m complaining, but weren’t there supposed to be more owls ready to spread their wings?” Susan murmured.

“There were,” Alexandra confessed. “But a few failed the basic training my guardian gave them. Lady Zabini said it’s very common when the mother is a first-generation owl.”

“Atalanta is a first-generation mail owl?” the Hufflepuff raised her voice a bit in surprise.

“Yes, I confess I was a bit surprised too,” the Ravenclaw teenager admitted. “Her mail service has been so impeccable since I bought her that it is obvious she was born for it, and when I visited the Diagon Alley owl shop the first time, I didn’t enquire about her ancestry. But there’s spells to detect this sort of thing, and they are formal. Atalanta is the first snowy owl of her line honour-bound to me or anyone else.”

“Then let’s hope her daughters will be as competent, diligent, and beautiful as their mother,” the Bones Heiress said lightly, caressing the white and black feathers of Phoebe. Unlike Luna and Atalanta, Selene and her sister weren’t a perfect white.

The young owl of course hooted and beamed as the compliments flowed.

“Luna, Luna is not a stuffed toy,” the raven-haired Champion called to the blonde girl as she noticed the hugging session between the two was not over. “Let the poor owl breathe.”

Luna – the witch, not the owl – pouted but obeyed.

The group of girls and boys turned to their left and-

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ALEXANDRA!”

They had, Alexandra noticed with amusement, even managed to corrupt Hermione into singing it with them.

“Thank you! Thank you!”

The table which had been transported onto the grass near the Manor was so huge it almost deserved the term of duellist platform, and as the Weasley Twins had been commissioned for bringing many sweets and treats, there were enough food and drinks to feed a regiment.

And this abundance was necessary, because a lot of students had been invited today.

At first Alexandra had only been willing to invite the friends she felt the closest to, perhaps adding one or two for good measure, but her guardian had somehow, in a two-hour-long debate, argued that if she wanted to play the game like a proper Heiress was supposed to, it was best to invite plenty of potential allies.

Therefore a lot of wizards and witches of her age were present to clasp her hand, congratulate her for reaching her fourteenth birthday, wish her best luck for the coming year, and other merry wishes.

For Ravenclaw, Alexandra had invited nearly all her year-mates and a few younger and older housemates. Morag, Nigel, Luna, and Hermione were always going to be invited of course. Since they had fully supported her during the many incidents of third year and were rather good company, Su Li, Padma Patil, Mandy Brocklehurst, Terry Boot, Kevin Entwhistle, and Michael Corner received a letter too. Penelope Clearwater and Cho Chang had come – the boyfriend of the latter had declined it though.

All in all, the only Ravenclaws of her year to not be invited were Anthony Goldstein and Stephen Cornfoot, but those two she had never intended to share an afternoon with. Despite being in the same Common Room and the same classes for the better part of twenty-seven months, it would be a miracle if she had more than ten conversations with them, and the allegiance of their Houses to Dumbledore had always complicated matters.

For Hufflepuff...well, it was easier to begin with who had not been invited in her year. And the answer was: Zacharias Smith. The Hufflepuffs were rather well-renowned for partying and enjoying the moment, so since Susan had proposed to invite all her friends, the green-eyed Heiress had not replied negatively.

The two other Houses were far less represented. The number of Slytherins Alexandra felt she could trust, even for a birthday party, was rather slim. Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis, and Hestia and Flora Carrow, since the twins of the dungeons were not that bad when they debated Arithmancy.

For the Gryffindors, err...there was only the Weasley Twins. Alexandra had sent a letter to Parvati Patil – she was a gossip, but since her twin was invited, it would be rude to not do the same – but the Potter Heiress had received a negative reply and apologies which were at best ten percent sincere.

“A speech! A speech!” the Weasley Twins clamoured.

“I solemnly swear I will change the Hogwarts charter to authorise a class of pranks and artifices the moment I become Headmistress of Hogwarts!” Alexandra took great care to not pour any magic in this; she didn’t plan to become a teacher for now, but there was such a trap as swearing idiotic vows and regretting them a few seconds later.

“And we will usher a reign of pranks and chaos upon the castle!” promised the Twin Terrors, beginning to act as improvised waiters for the Butterbeer. “Hurrah!”

“HURRAH!”

“It has to be said,” Morag whispered in her ear, “investing your money into the Weasley Twins will likely be one of the best investments you will ever make in your career.”

“Yes, I definitely am pleased with how it turned out,” Alexandra smiled before raising an eyebrow as the cakes were brought. “Wow! Just wow! Books...in chocolate?”

“Hey, the Ravenclaws are devouring...metaphorically...books in the library every year!” Fred defended himself, and the Hufflepuffs cheered, band of traitors. “Today, everyone will share the delight of eating books!”

“This is sacrilegious!” Hermione shouted, joking for the first time about her ‘disease’.

“It might be a bit heretical,” Su Li, who was sitting in front of her, agreed, “the Grey Lady might not be pleased...as long as we don’t find a way for her to enjoy the taste of chocolate!”

The party went completely uncontrolled from there, with House Elves and men and women in service of House Zabini firing Weasley-built fireworks and animations, and the Twins showing plenty of their latest inventions, which left everyone in high spirits. The chocolate books were indeed devoured to the last piece.

And from there the presents began to arrive in her hands. For the first time, Alexandra understood why Dudley had loved receiving so many gifts every time he blew out the candles. It was good. Life was good. It was...very good.

As the hydra in her was quite satisfied by the chocolate, the honey, and all the sweetness of the food she had swallowed, the Basilisk-Slayer acknowledged that between past exploits and today, she was seriously going to have to plan for a huge library room if everything went as planned and a new Potter Manor was built.

“*The Origin of Glyphs and Runes*?” Alexandra asked as Padma Patil presented her with another large book, richly decorated in a purely Indian theme.

“It is a translation of one of the greatest works of the founder of the Patil line,” the chocolate-skinned Ravenclaw explained her. “Well, the translation of the first volume. The second and the third are more...restricted of access for non-Patil witches.”

“It’s only the first volume?” the green-eyed Ravenclaw wasn’t easily impressed or daunted by a reading challenge, but...this book had to be seven hundred pages, easily. Padma nodded. “Well, it will be quite sufficient for me...for a few years. It’s an excellent gift, thank you, Padma.”

Hermione was the next gift-bearer after the black-haired twin of the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw duo. She too was bearing a large book, though it was a rare edition written by several French dragon-tamers. The mistress of Fingolfin – the Britannian Gold had to stay in his private quarters for today unfortunately, as his appearance would generate too many questions and uncontrollable rumours all over Britain – remarked with amusement that the sale of the work was...frowned upon in British-ruled lands. Something about a former Minister declaring they had no lessons to receive from the French.

Thankfully she was fluent in French now, otherwise it would have been difficult to appreciate this gift at its true value.

Morag had found for her *Of Oghams and Enchantments*, by Henry Malfoy. It was an old masterpiece, and, as Tracey Davis and George Weasley confirmed, one of the best things to ever be done by the Malfoy line since their arrival in Britain.

Nigel and Luna presented her with a special edition of the *Loud Duck* exclusively on her, ranging from the most ridiculous rumours they’d been able to find, her ascension as Ravenclaw Champion, and absolutely hilarious interviews made with the Weasley Twins declaring she was ‘better than the better Butterbeer’, ‘darker than the point-counter of House Gryffindor after a good day of pranks’, and their favourite for the seat of Enforcer-in-Pranks and Grand Dark Lady of the Castle.

Since said edition soon appeared in over one hundred copies all over the long table, it very quickly became a considerable success.

After that, Alexandra received a lot of books. Quite a lot of Ravenclaws and non-Ravenclaws had apparently decided that a book was the safest bet, which was...not a bad gamble admittedly, and her collection was going to be spectacular by sunset. Her mother had sent her one too, a large thing covered in an illusion to hide the fact it was about Death Magic. There were a few exceptions here and there. Tracey Davis offered her a set of seven silver daggers. Like the athame Susan had offered her, these were specialised instruments for Rune-carving and other Rune-related deeds.

Stella Zabini, it went without saying, was not going to offer something as unfashionable as a *book*. The package the Potter Heiress received from Blaise hands – most of the adults accompanying her ‘invitees’ were spending time in another section of the Manor grounds – contained a photo of an enormous wardrobe filled with clothes of all kind, and several receipts authorising her to buy very expensive robes for the balls of the Tournament amongst many other things.

Blaise’s own gift was a cane sculpted into the shape of many species of snakes, with a gold pommel shaped like a hissing cobra ready to strike. It also had a hidden compartment enlarged by a space-expansion Charm to keep various legal and illegal things close at hand.

“The cane is a very nice gift,” the Ravenclaw complimented her Slytherin acquaintance. “I’m not getting any choice with the wardrobe, am I?”

“It should already be installed next to your bedroom,” Blaise replied drily.

Alexandra huffed theatrically. Nothing to do but acknowledge the unavoidable, then.

Seconds later, Susan’s lips were on hers.

“It’s an excellent birthday gift,” Alexandra almost hissed in satisfaction as plenty of students, led of course by George, whistled and cheered.

“I’ve given my true present to your owl,” her girlfriend whispered before handing her another large book on advanced elemental spells. “You need a secondary magical focus for the Tournament.”

“Susan it’s too-“ she wanted to say ‘too much’; a secondary focus was in general not that expensive for the average Heir or Heiress of an Ancient House, and for those of higher standing, it was pocket money. As long as you weren’t too powerful and had a common magical affinity, that is. She was the Champion of the Morrigan, a Lady-level witch, and her alignment was Dark-lightning. There was a reason she used Fragarach as a reserve focus, and it wasn’t only because of its sharpness and its deadly properties.

“It wasn’t too expensive,” the redhead posed a finger on her lips before speaking louder. “And I will expect proper compensation. I’ve heard the Champions are granted palatial lodges and living quarters. I expect to be regularly invited inside...”

Alexandra blushed and decided to drink a lot of Butterbeer glasses to hide her embarrassment after that under the applause and the calls of several traitors for more kisses to be immortalised on camera.

**1 August 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

If you ignored all your magical senses, the object very much looked like a silvery metallic glove. As a result, one could conclude that magic was very deceptive.

“A very interesting focus,” Stella Zabini declared, one of her eyes covered by a magical monocle no doubt increasing her Lamia ocular abilities. “The silver was purified by magic, though not to the point of Alchemy, and the five gemstones hidden in it have all been aligned with the element of lightning.”

Alexandra promised herself she would really, really buy or craft something nice for Susan for her next birthday – which was coming in half a month, incidentally.

“That shouldn’t be enough for me,” Alexandra said hesitantly. The gemstones would properly catalyse her magical energy, but to channel it into spells like her wand did...

“It wouldn’t normally,” the Black Widow gave her a smirk, “but, and this is the reason the charming Bones Heiress didn’t want to give it to you in public, there are thin sections of runic-carved bone to protect the gemstones and channel your magic outwards.”

“Bone,” Alexandra sighed loudly, knowing in advance what was coming. “I suppose they aren’t coming from a Hippogriff or another magical species.”

 “There have been magical foci created from bones of certain noble creatures,” her magical guardian removed her monocle, allowing her for a second or two to see a reptilian iris. “But to my best knowledge, Hippogriffs are rarely considered. Unlike a Griffin, the magic properties of their parts are rather...subpar. There’s a reason materials like dragonbone were ardently desired for thousands of years while others were ignored by wizardkind.”

And somehow, Alexandra doubted the dragons had been very happy at the idea of wizards taking their bones.

“Yes.” A reminder to make sure Fingolfin could defend himself the moment she decided to present him to the public. It would be best if he was backed by the power of two magically-armed Dreadnoughts and her own Animagus form to discourage any potential dragon-killer. “So these are human bones.”

“I suppose Heiress Bones informed you how her House rose to prominence.”

“They were the most vindictive and dangerous Necromancers of the Isles.” And if she had to guess, the Basilisk-Slayer thought ‘Bones’ had begun as a bad pun which, like many things, was imagined once the bottom of a barrel of magical alcohol was reached.

“Oh, they were more powerful than that, Alexandra.” The dark-skinned widow’s voice took a more teaching tone. “What is the most common form of corpse-raising?”

“The Inferi.” Even if the Exchequer had not used tens of thousands of them for their assault of Nurmengard, the ‘magical zombies’ were so well-known any aspirant Dark Lord had used them in recent European history. “And to get rid of them fast, it is best to use fire. A lot of fire.”

“Precisely,” Stella Zabini agreed. “Since the Inferi were already useless unless gathered in hordes and given costly and time-expensive protections, the ancestors of House Bones had the simple but by no means easy idea to specialise into the rising of skeletons that they had already ‘prepared’ with their necromantic abilities.”

Alexandra wasn’t a Necromancer, but she could see the advantages from the start. The weakness to fire, for one thing, would be instantly cancelled. The skeletons would also be far, far harder to kill. Not having encountered a specimen, there was no way to know their resistance to spells, but it was entirely possible Severing Charms would have to be cast overpowered to separate the head from the shoulders. Bombarda may be the best solution to kill them in great numbers, though.

 “There were rumours one of the Bones who was killed in the last war had the talent,” the Lady of House Zabini continued lightly. “I think that with your little present, you have the confirmation the skill was not lost with the near-extinction of the main line of House Bones.”

“How did Voldemort and his Death Eaters manage to kill so many of them if they have several Necromancers in their ranks?”

“*Potential* Necromancers, Alexandra,” her guardian insisted a lot on the first word. “The Ministry and the DMLE are as aware as you and I of the past of the Bones. I heavily suspect there are a lot of ancient alarms near their main properties, and as such the few wizards and witches really trained in Dark Magic always practised behind the wards of Bones Manor. And since in general the Death Eaters and their leader always took care to trap them when they weren’t in their principal stronghold, there weren’t any skeletons to summon in time to do any good. Necromancer is a very impressive title, but absent the proper ‘servants’, it is more a tightening chain around your neck than an asset.”

 This was something Alexandra promised herself to keep in mind. After all, it wasn’t applicable only to Necromancy. There were examples of battlefields where many fields of magic would be anchors dragging you to your death.

“But with your affinities and the symbol of bone joined with Death, this artefact is an excellent gift for you. Train hard and you may be able to use it in one hand while you wield sword or wand in the other.”

Yes, really, really prepare a great gift for Susan fourteenth birthday.

**4 August 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

“This is the most common diagram used in Alchemy transmutations,” Cho told her after ten minutes of effort. “I’m sure you are already familiar with it.”

Alexandra blinked before nodding slowly. Yes, she had already seen it before. A triangle containing a circle itself divided in two parts by a line.

“This is the symbol Grindelwald chose to weave on his armies’ banners,” the Ravenclaw Champion spoke. “Weird. I wasn’t aware Grindelwald was an Alchemist.”

Though if anything, it totally validated the information of the Black Files. After all, Grindelwald might not have dabbled in Alchemy, but his boyfriend, Albus Dumbledore, certainly did.

“I checked too, and as far as I am aware, he wasn’t an Alchemist,” the Asian-looking witch shrugged. “Of course, Alchemy is such an ancient and respected art that the symbol has taken its own legend across the centuries. In the books owned by my family, the extremities of the triangle were supposed to represent Destruction, Creation, and Transformation.”

Alexandra narrowed her eyes in contemplation.

“Are there any legends tying this symbol to Life and Death?”

“Plenty,” the older Ravenclaw admitted before pointing a finger to the left base of the triangle, “Life is there, then you go to Death,” her thin finger touched the right extremity, “and there is obviously the crossing between the two...”

“Murder,” this was not a difficult conclusion to arrive. Instantaneous transformation from life to death rarely happened on demand without it.

“Yes, murder,” Cho grimaced. “If you agree, I would prefer this stay at the very theoretical stage. Alchemy is already dangerous as it is, I have no wish right now to ‘dabble’ in Dark Alchemy. It is far, far more dangerous, and I’ve heard Britain and most of the Ministries in Western Europe have a...poor view of every wizard and witch who try to walk on that path.”

“Agreed,” the Basilisk-Slayer replied. “It was just for curiosity’s sake and to verify one or two assumptions.”

“Of course,” Cho didn’t pursue further on the subject, “Alchemy does not need to be involved in matters of life and death to be extremely dangerous. As I’m sure you have noticed, this is not the pentacle with a seven-branched star used in rituals and elemental configurations. There is no circle-ward to cut the magical surge from the rest of the world.”

“Really?” Alexandra threw a long glance at the triangle. “I was thinking the triangle was playing the role of the classic circle, and the circle here was used like the pentacle’s star was?”

“A good deduction worthy of a Ravenclaw,” Cho told her. “But unfortunately, it’s an incorrect deduction. The line inside the circle makes it really impossible symbolically and magically, you see. You’re smart. I know you will understand what it means.”

“The entirety of the magical power fuelled into the transformation, the Alchemical ‘transmutation’, is consumed by the triangle.”

“Yes,” the girlfriend of Cedric Diggory confirmed without any trace of amusement in her voice. “Which is why every book and source of lore I’ve been able to put my hands upon agree on one thing, and that we may call it Rule One.”

The future Ravenclaw fifth-year paused for effect two seconds before resuming her speech.

“Do not, under any circumstance, go into an Alchemy triangle which might be activated at any moment. The transmutation takes magic wherever it can find it. The blood of a witch or a wizard has enormous power. I’m sure you begin to see the picture.”

“Yes, I do.” Staying inside an Alchemy circle was a death sentence, avoid it at all costs. Whether it would rip your magical core out of your body first or you would be exsanguinated really made little difference in the end. And it was certainly a demise where being a Hydra Animagus would not save her life. “The other rules?”

“Rule Two is that well before the diagram is carved or traced, there must be a series of glyphs and stopgap measures to end the transmutation faster than the Alchemist can click his fingers. Rule Three is similar: the power you pour into an Alchemical procedure needs to be controlled and has to be stopped if you desire it.”

“It looks to me like these two rules are there to emphasize control is everything in Alchemy.”

“Pretty much,” the other Ravenclaw clasped her hands in a meditative pose. “To be brutally honest, once you pour the magic and the transmutation begins, the Alchemist has little control of what happens inside the triangle. Going inside is suicidal, interacting magically with the process is a guarantee of things blowing up in your face, and if you try to create a flaw in the Alchemical lines, raw magic will begin to erupt in a chaotic and uncontrollable fashion.”

Alexandra scratched her head.

“Are you sure there are no wards allowed near this Alchemical symbol of doom?” the more Cho told her, the more Alexandra understood why Grindelwald had chosen it as his symbol.

“I am sure,” the older girl assured her. “The ward your guardian placed thirty metres away from this pavilion is the closest an independent magical protection can be emplaced.”

“Joy,” Alexandra murmured before raising her voice again. “I suppose Rule Four is to limit the interactions between the outside of the ‘Alchemy triangle’ and the inside?”

There had to be a reason why the single room of the pavilion was a bland white with absolutely no furniture or decoration of any kind.

“Yes, though it’s not ‘limit’, but ‘reduce the interactions to zero’,” Cho Chang explained. “A single falling leaf can cause catastrophic reactions if it perturbs an ongoing transmutation. Everything **must** be accounted when it comes to Alchemy. There is no tolerance for improvisation and the art of ‘roughly’, ‘maybe’, ‘I was so close’, ‘I wasn’t paying attention,’ and all other stupidities everyone has done one day or another.”

Alexandra had a sudden feeling that the Asian-looking witch had not taken Divination as an elective. If the rumours about Trelawney were true, the fraud and Diggory’s girlfriend would have quickly fought and tried to kill each other.

“Rule Six...”

**7 August 1994, MacDougal Manor, Ireland**

“So...is your blood a super-acid?”

Alexandra rolled her eyes...again.

“No, Morag, my blood isn’t an acid,” seriously, she was a Champion of the Morrigan and a Hydra Animagus, but her body remained mostly human and acid-less. When she was in a human body, at least.

“Damn it!” Cue the exchange of bronze coins between Hermione and Morag.

“However, I have many latent poisons in my bloodstream. So if you want someone who can bleed upon another person’s injury without causing him or her grave health problems, I am not that witch.”

 Honestly, ‘grave health problems’ was likely the understatement of the month. With the number of poisons the future Ravenclaw fourth-year had absorbed in the last weeks, her blood must have dozens of poisons in it. So unless it was a very limited ‘accident’ or she just wanted to make a limited point, the final result was most likely going to be fatal.

“I hope you will have antidotes for us.”

“My dear guardian is taking care of it. She said it was necessary anyway given that you are coming with me to participate in the Tournament.”

Morag stopped smiling.

“Err...are assassinations by poison and other toxic substances...likely?”

“There was a Tournament in the fourteenth century where they had to choose new Champions for all schools after the First Trial due to poison,” Hermione said slowly, having evidently memorized most of the infamous history of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

“The one where they were poisoned and had to steal the antidote ingredients in a Manticore’s lair?” Alexandra asked for confirmation. That one had been rather bloody, even by the standards of the inter-school competition.

“Yes, though no one realised until later that the Durmstrang High Master had cast a curse of sterility upon the Beauxbatons Headmaster, and the French retaliated by poisoning several promising witches from Germany and Scandinavia.”

In hindsight, maybe they should have renamed the Tournament ‘how to begin a formal war under the veil of magical international cooperation’...

“Well, it was a bit ignored after someone released a few thousand Inferi during the final Task,” Hogwarts had won this Tournament, Alexandra remembered, by virtue of having the last Champion standing. “And I think the Yule Ball of that competition had many Honor Duels fought to the death.”

Somehow, the Potter Heiress found it difficult to believe Durmstrang had found honour or glory in hosting the Tri-Wizard Tournament that time.

“Alexandra,” the red-haired pureblood said very seriously, “you’d better not die or get seriously wounded. Because if you’re incapacitated to the point we are needed to step into the arena, I will kill you first...and then hire the closest Necromancer to animate your body and make your dead body participate anyway.”

“Your unconditional support really warms my heart,” the green-eyed teenager raised her wand in a very formal – and ironic – salute. “Is there something else you want to ask?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Hermione said rapidly. “I’ve heard a hydra’s heads can breathe lightning or poison, but not both. Are you limited like them?”

“First, the hydra are only limited in the sense that their heads can only spit one thing in their lifetime before their destruction. Should one head be destroyed in a fight, the head which will grow to replace it does not necessarily have the same properties.” Although for some unfathomable reason, the proportion of poison and lightning-breathing heads generally renamed the same. That is, three heads able to poison anything living, and six heads for lightning attacks. “And in a way, every time I retransform into my human body, the effect is the same as erasing the board of skills of my Animagus form. As such, I decide instinctively which properties I want for my heads. The first time I transformed of my own will at Zabini Manor, I had nine lightning blasts and zero poison-spitting heads.”

“That must have been quite a show.” Oh Morag, you have no idea. Alexandra noted internally to absolutely organise something at Zabini Manor before the end of the holidays just for the pleasure to see her face and take some photos as she transformed. House Elves were such dedicated blackmailers when you said the magic words.

“It was,” the Ravenclaw Animagus yawned lazily. “It is still a lot of work controlling my animal body, and I’m not even speaking of controlling the strength of my spells. But I’m getting better. At the rate I’m progressing, I should be back at an adequate level of control by mid-September. Along with everything I’m doing this summer, I should have mastered the realistic goals I wrote before summer.”

“Occlumency?”

“I have very basic shields for now, but I’m getting better,” Alexandra was never going to be gifted in this field, but Stella Zabini had assured her that for a teenager, she was doing very well.

“And the Dark Arts?” Hermione bit her lip before deciding to ask.

“For the moment, it’s rather ‘Dark Art.’ Which is appropriate, since I have only mastered the Ecclesial and learned two other spells,” and for good measure, she decided to cast the Ecclesial here and now. The incantation was spoken, and in an odour of brimstone and a lengthening of the shadows in their study room, a gigantic hydra of shadows and darkness rose from her wand and hissed threateningly.

“You can do a corporeal Ecclesial? It’s worth a lot of bonus points for the DADA OWLs!”

“Of course you would think about that, Hermione...”

**10 August 1994,** **Quidditch World Cup area, Dartmoor, England**

“IRELAND! IRELAND!”

“They’re quite loud, these Irish, eh George?”

“Well, my dear twin, they have won the Quidditch World Cup...and in a very one-sided manner, if you allow me the compliment.”

Fred Weasley and his twin brother knew how to fly and play Quidditch, thank you very much. They were talented and knew how to exploit any lapse of their opponents on a flying broom, something which had allowed them to keep their positions of Gryffindor Beaters since their second year – and they were about to begin their sixth next month. And unlike a few idiots in Slytherin, they never had the advantages of professional-grade brooms.

The World Cup had shown them that as far as Ireland and a few other teams were concerned, they weren’t playing in the same magical dimension. Yes, they had better brooms like the Firebolt, but the National Team of Ireland had elevated their teamwork to the rank of art where there was nothing to improve...save perhaps their Seeker.

Then again, it wasn’t fair for Lynch. It wasn’t his fault he was against a Bulgarian Seeker who was certainly born on a broom with a Snitch in his hand.

“Maybe we should have bet a few Galleons after all,” George declared, avoiding a pack of Irish drinking and levitating tankards of beer to their tents. “I knew Ireland was going to beat Bulgaria, and that Krum would catch the Snitch!”

“Yes, yes,” Fred assured his brother. “The only question is: who would have bet with us? The same reasons why we can’t officially open our shop before our seventeenth birthday apply here too.”

“Rumour is Bagman would have taken our bets.”

“And rumour is there is a fifty-fifty chance he would have ‘lost’ our winnings in the aftermath or sold us fool’s gold.” If they had not been forewarned before the World Cup, they might have fallen into the trap, but the whispers had spread far and wide after each preliminary. And while Bagman was still the Head of the Department of Games and Sports, several Badgers and Snakes believed his bankruptcy had only been avoided by the narrowest of margins. “Besides, it was far closer than I feel comfortable. Ireland won 200-170, not 300-170. If Krum had caught the Snitch a couple of minutes earlier, it would have been a triumph for Bulgaria, not Ireland.”

“True,” his twin recognised, “it was better to not take the risk. Besides, with the payments for the different birthday parties and other associated projects, we could have gambled it to make it worthwhile, but if mother became aware of it...”

The Twins shivered dramatically. They had seen dangerous things and faced a few of them wand in hand, but all paled in comparison to the wrath of Molly Weasley, Queen of the Burrow, and until they were seventeenth, a sleeping dragon they didn’t want to rouse.

Yes, they had learned the Hogwarts motto. Why were people so surprised when they quoted it?

“Where is Lee? It’s thanks to him we got these seats.” Hardly lodge or first-rate tickets, but their duo was hardly in position to bemoan about that. “We aren’t going to tell his parents we ‘lost him’.”

“I think I see him swaggering and declaring his love for a pretty blonde,” George whistled in admiration. “It seems our good friend has decided to begin in advance his international seduction.”

Fred followed the gaze of his twin and whistled in turn...before chuckling.

“Yep, but he’s not the only one to be vying for the hand of the princess.” The blonde witch was beautiful...and also surrounded by a cohort of admirers and potential boyfriends. Lee was only one of many boys gathered around her.

“Let’s give him ten minutes,” Fred proposed. “I would give him more...if I had a camera with me.”

A flash of green illuminated the sky.

“I thought the Ministry employees had managed to convince the Irish to tone down the fireworks?”

“This isn’t a firework,” Fred replied, as the cheers and the ruckus of festivities abruptly decreased. And the reason for this was not hard to find.

A colossal skull shining with malevolence had been conjured east of the tents’ camp. A gigantic snake protruded from its mouth, and the combination was illuminated in a greenish horrid light.

It was the Dark Mark.

And as explosions which were certainly not fireworks began to ring out in the distance, Fred instantly knew this wasn’t the work of an ‘Imperiused paragon of nobility’ having drunk too much Firewhiskey.

“George,” the eldest of the Weasley Twins began hesitantly, “we managed to coax out the incantation for the Patronus from Alexandra recently.” At her birthday party to be accurate, when the sheer resistance to alcohol of the Potter Heiress had been destroyed by the volume of alcohol she drank and the proximity of Susan Bones had managed to lower her guard for a few hours. “You’re better than me at these Light spells. Do you think you can manage to send her a message using the incantation?”

Their father was very tight-lipped about all the years he had spent fighting with the Order of the Phoenix in the last war, but long-range communication by Patronus was something he had not made great mystery of, since it was something no Dark Wizard could really replicate.

“I have great motivation to achieve this feat,” his twin answered back as Lee ran towards them. “But I don’t know if it is going to be enough, Fred. I’ve never cast the corporeal spell before.”

“Then let’s try it. Together.” Around them, panic spread and what had been a post-Quidditch game celebration turned to chaos and despair.

**Author’s note**: Next up: violence and death at the Quidditch World Cup.

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