**Chapter 51**

**Hogwarts Bad News Express**

“*I am Alexandra Potter. And I kill monsters*.” Quote attributed in 1995 to Alexandra Potter, authenticity never confirmed.

**1 September 1993, Hogwarts Express**

 “Alexandra, we have a big problem...”

“So I see,” she replied calmly though she felt none of it in her heart. In one gesture, she levitated the clothes-filled trunk with the affairs of Hermione and Morag. The other she placed in front of her and opened it.

By sheer precaution, she had taken to leave several objects for an emergency on top and so it took her only a few seconds to seize the scabbard of Fragarach.

The pale visage of Scylla Yaxley went paler seeing the blade. Apparently, she remembered the sword very well.

“Don’t kill me!”

Alexandra snorted loudly.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I am not going to kill you.” The Potter Heiress nodded to Morag, and Claiomh Solais was withdrawn. “I want answers.”

Contrary to what the uncountable rumours spread by the Hogwarts rumour mill said, Fragarach’s original function had not been to slay Kings of Snakes, Arthur and all sort of dangerous Dark Wizards and Creatures. No, Fragarach was the Answerer, the Sword of Truth. Placing the metal on the throat of someone had the effect of a very unpleasant dose of Veritaserum for the person on the receiving end. And unlike the truth serum, there was no antidote. That didn’t mean there was no counter; just that no one had been able to find one in recorded history – alas given the nebulous records of the Wizarding World, it wasn’t exactly a clear-cut assurance.

But with all the wands and weapons pointed in the compartment, the blonde-haired girl had no choice but to let her approach her sword close to her head. When metal touched the skin, the violet eyes of Scylla Yaxley rolled and her body shivered.

“You name,” Alexandra demanded.

“Ginny Weasley,” replied in a monotone voice the girl. Alexandra raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“Why did you transform back to the appearance you had in the Chamber of Secrets?”

“My family was ambushed when we went to Egypt,” and just like this, the Ravenclaw third-year knew she wasn’t going to like the news at all. “We were visiting the thousands-year old tomb of a Kemet Priest when we were caught in a ritual circle and immobilised. The illusions and mental barriers Dumbledore used on me dissolved moments after and in my mind I began to fight with Scylla.”

“How did you escape?”

“We didn’t. There was a woman...she drew more ritual circles and there was something in me...suddenly Scylla exploded and I had her memories...I felt her hate...I felt her die.”

Somehow, Alexandra felt she could be excused if she admitted she was scared by what she had heard. In theory, what had just been described was possible.

But then, in theory many things were possible with magic.

Killing mentally a psychopath personality with a combination of Legilimency and ritual, on the other hand, was something bordering on the mythical and the near-miraculous. Dumbledore certainly wasn’t capable of it, else he would have resolved the problem in this manner at the end of second year. And according to the main witness, it had been done quickly.

“What happened next?”

“I was given some enchanted gloves.” There were indeed objects answering to that description on her knees. “I was told that as long as I wear them, I will be able to pretend everything is fine in public.”

That looked like a powerful glamour or illusion linked to an enchanted object. Maybe Flitwick and Dumbledore were capable to do the same, but Alexandra doubted other Professors would have the sheer power and skill.

“Describe me the appearance of those who attacked you.”

“There was only one person, a woman in black-grey robes. Her visage was covered by a mask and she had dark hairs and a dark skin colour.”

That was not useful at all, obviously. Female, dark hairs and dark skin. By that description, there had to be thousands of witches who could be considered suspicious.

“Did she say anything to you?”

“Yes, she said...she said she was Isis, Queen of the Exchequer.” Alexandra felt suddenly very cold and the message was not over. “She asked me to go back to England and serve Alexandra Potter, Basilisk-Slayer and Champion of the Morrigan.”

Shit.

She had a good self-control, but this time she swore for several minutes every insult she had learned in the last years. Of all the worst-case scenarios they had been able to imagine during summer, this one had to top all of them. The Exchequer knew of her. Alexandra had hoped she was too small to attract their attention but apparently these efforts were for naught.

“What happened next?”

“I fell unconscious and when I woke up, we were standing at the entrance of the tomb like nothing had happened. We returned to our inn and I told Fred and George everything. They believed me and they helped me hide my new looks from the rest of the family. When we travelled back to London, they helped me find a new wand. The one I used was not functioning for me at all.”

Wonderful, more people in the secret...just what she and the Exiled didn’t need. A last question and she was going to stop the interrogation.

“In your opinion, have the rest of your family been cursed, mentally changed or subjected to the Imperius?”

“Fred and George haven’t,” answered the girl in the same monotonous voice. “They have a bond between them which would have alerted them the moment someone tries to control them. I have no idea for the others, though Bill is a Curse-Breaker and has powerful Occlumency defences.”

In other words, the rest of the Weasley family could be ticking bombs and Alexandra couldn’t do anything against it. This day was really getting better and better. She had intended to recruit Percy Weasley, but now it was looking like it was a huge risk.

Breathing loudly, Alexandra withdrew Fragarach from Scylla – or she supposed Ginny’s throat – before falling in the last empty seat of the compartment.

“That was not something pleasant,” commented the girl which was in looks the Herald of Slytherin, massaging several times her throat. Alexandra rolled her shoulders, not a trace of excuse in her behaviour.

“I had to be sure.” The green-eyed witch turned to the rest of the Exiled, which had expressions ranging from anger to fear and various shades of both. One after the other the gloves were put back and suddenly they had a very convincing version of Ginny Weasley in front of them. If she had not seen the blonde haired, violet-eyed girl second before, Alexandra wouldn’t have believed it was an illusion. “By the way, will a blood test say you are Ginny Weasley or Scylla Yaxley?”

As the eyes of ‘Ginny’ were filled with something close to fear, the answer to this question was certainly not the one the young witch had wanted.

“I register as Scylla Yaxley. I have some of her memories, and I have her blood, body and appearance. Since there is no way for the Ministry or Gringotts to make a comparison of souls...”

In this instance, it was difficult to blame the Ministry laws. There had not to be a lot of cases in recent history where this sort of blood rituals shenanigans shattered existing customs.

“I suppose you have already the Gringotts official letter.” This was more an affirmation than a question. The goblins rarely left such an important issue in the air.

“I also received the ring,” a flash of light on one of her fingers confirmed it before Ginny grimaced. “What I am going to do? For the last days of this summer, I could avoid Lord Yaxley but the moment I leave Hogwarts last summer, I will be...”

Alexandra shrugged without a word.

“You gained power and control. It is a bit too late to cry about the price.” Morag’s tone was not sorry at all. “Luna, is there any reason why you are here?”

“The nargles told me something interesting was going to take place,” the Exiled mutually rolled their eyes. Well, at least there were some things staying the same. Wearing glasses and clothes which would have been considered weird even in an asylum, the second-year Ravenclaw stood and left the compartment, quickly followed by Ginny. The illusion-covered girl turned around as she opened the doors.

“I will try to do better...I...Ollivander’s new wand is acacia, eleven inches, hydra heartstring...”

When the doors closed, there was a long moment of silence. Alexandra closed her eyes, wondering what sort of significance another hydra-core wand would have in the chaotic situation they found themselves in.

After a minute, she fixed her sword’s scabbard on her back and hid it under a black cloak.

“We aren’t going to be attacked on the Hogwarts, you know,” remarked Nigel.

“This journey has started badly, I’m not going to take any chance,” Alexandra told darkly. “Are they any more disasters I should be aware of before I leave to search for the Weasley Twins?”

“My father has disappeared three days ago from the hospital in Paris,” said Lyre with an ugly scowl she rarely showed in public or in private. “No one knows where he is now.”

“The Exchequer has been busy...” Hermione’s comment sadly struck a point. The monsters in the dark were not satisfied by the events of the summer. They were striking everywhere...and the Exiled had not even the surprise advantage in this game.

“We have also been unable to contact again Lockhart. The contact boxes he used in Oxford are overflowing with unread fan-mail letters.”

The four girls and the boy looked at each other with gloomy expressions. It was something to know you were outnumbered and outclassed; it was quite another to see it materialise in tangible facts of real life.

The train began to move shortly after. It was eleven o’clock, and the Hogwarts Express was now leaving London for the colder hills and valleys of Scotland.

“We will speak later of the problems created by Ginny’s little revelations.” Knowing the ‘Queen of the Exchequer’ had her eyes on them was NOT how she had expected this school year to begin. “I need to talk to the Twins. Their little sister told the truth, but I would be more reassured if I have their version of events.”

“Okay, just leave us some Sickles if the trolley comes to the compartment before you’re coming back...”

 Alexandra nodded and gave a dozen silver coins to Morag before standing up, telling her condolences to Lyre for her loss and marching towards the end of a train with a heavy heart. This was really, really a sour note after this summer. More than ever, the contrast with MacDougal or Zabini Manor was brutal: inside the wards, protection, friendship and a pleasant life; outside, the dark and dangerous world.

After a few seconds of reflexion, the Potter Heiress decided to try her chance towards the end of the train. Fred and George were always as a matter of principle as far away from the Prefects as it was possible...perhaps because they had filled several compartments with fireworks and pranks during the last time they set foot on it.

She didn’t go far. By the third compartment, someone opened the door and walked out fast to block her progression. It was extremely rude. But then, the offender was Neville Longbottom, future Lord of House Longbottom, Boy-Who-Lived, Leader of the New Marauders, member of the Golden Trio and holder of a glorious thousand titles.

“Potter, we need to talk.”

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“Potter, we need to talk.”

The look Neville received was not one he was used to. Sure, they were people glaring at him a lot of time. ‘Repented’ Death Eaters and their children knew it was politically suicidal to attack him in public but they could taunt him and make veiled threats. Snape during his Potions classes had mastered the ‘breathing the same air is an inconvenience’ as an art. His grandmother could also transform into a frightening woman without warning.

The Killing Curse-coloured eyes did not glare. They just...burned. It was not anger or loathing, more a Ravenclaw-type expression you were not respected and certainly not liked.

“My schedule is busy today, Longbottom. I have other compartments to visit before yours. Wait an hour or two.”

Neville did his best not to show his frustration. Usually, meetings with Hufflepuffs, Gryffindors or Ravenclaws were really easy to organise. Whether they liked him or not, Hogwarts students knew his ideas had weight in Britain. And when he came of age, he was going to be the future Lord of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Longbottom.

It was obvious Alexandra Potter didn’t care about this.

“It’s about Life Debts.” He had made an effort to capitalise the names in his sentence before he opened the doors of his compartment and returned to his seat. To his relief, she followed him.

Ron and Leo stopped smiling when the Ravenclaw girl took a seat before them. Much as he wanted to say a joke, Neville didn’t. If there was a threat scale at Hogwarts, the Exiled Queen of Ravenclaw would be in the same league as a few Professors. Last year, there had been quite a few debates who between Snape and Potter was the most dangerous fighter.

The appearance of the black-haired witch had not changed a lot during the summer, more variations of existing habits. Her hair was a bit longer, her visage was more tanned and her eyes were a bit brighter. Overall, it was the clothes where the biggest improvement was felt: Neville had seen Slytherin and Gryffindor Heiresses wear less expensive attire before. It was certainly a consequence of being under the Black Widow’s tutelage.

“Let’s get it over with,” Alexandra Potter announced in a bored tone once she was comfortably seated.

“Life Debts are a very important part of our customs!” Leo felt obliged to protest.

The look Potter sent him was unimpressed, and it was an understatement.

“Let me explain to you the principle of Life Debts, Black. This sort of bond happen when a wizard or a witch saves another wizard’s life, violates a ward-oath they had decided to agree or a myriad of conditions too boring to recount today. And the life-saving act has to be done freely, with no desire for monetary or business gain. By this point, both custom and magic are pushing the saved party to return favour to the saviour. It is not the hard pressure of certain absolute oaths, but it is not something to lightly dismiss.”

“I know all of that. Better than you do, know-it-all.”

Neville knew at that moment all his hopes to ally with the Potter Heiress this year were going down in flames. The cold smirk gave him very bad vibes.

“Then by all means, explain me the situation, Black.”

“It’s simple, really. Your father betrayed House Longbottom when he broke the Fidelius and told You-Know-Who where Neville and his parents were hiding. Due to the particularities of this Charm, this is a Debt House Potter owed to House Longbottom. And in the Chamber of Secrets, you saved Neville’s life, so House Longbottom owes House Potter a Debt. Now officially your two Houses can hold a little ceremony, cancel the Debts and bury the enmity.”

Neville grimaced because he would have preferred to explain it in a far more neutral tone. Leo’s tone was more and more antagonising and after a summer spent listening the rambling of decaying ninety years-old witches, he didn’t want to receive more Howlers during his first week. To say the truth, he had been surprised to learn the small pull he felt after long sessions of magic was an uncompleted Life-Debt. Potter was a Ravenclaw, and had never manifested deep people-saving intentions.

Alexandra Potter looked for two seconds at Leo before breaking into laughter.

“This is not funny!” exclaimed Ron.

“Yes, yes...the Life Debts are not funny,” was the short admission. “I was laughing because Heir Black managed to say with a straight face that we would be *good friends*.”

The last two words were uttered with so much venom Neville wondered how Alexandra Potter had not been sent directly in Slytherin in first year.

Neville cleared his throat.

“So do you agree?”

“Sure,” the Ravenclaw rolled her shoulders. “The wizards and witches of Britain assuredly don’t want the Boy-Who-Lived to jump in front of me in a misguided attempt to save my life.”

The Gryffindor in him didn’t like the arrogance in her voice. Unfortunately, while Alexandra Potter had been several times sent to the Hospital Wing during the first two years, most of the time her enemies had been sent to the cemetery in return.

“Black and Weasley will be our witnesses.”

Neville extended his hands and the black-haired witch did the same. Then they shook their hands and he winced, because for a girl, Alexandra Potter had really a lot of strength in her arms. Certain older Gryffindors had joked she was ‘sharper than a blade’ but the jibe had some truth in it.

“I, Alexandra Potter, Heiress of the Most Ancient House of Potter, voids all debts owed by House Longbottom to House Potter. So I swear by the power of my magic, so mote it be.”

Two sort of blue-green tendril-ropes went from Neville’s forearms to the girl hands. It had not to be dolorous, for Alexandra Potter maintained her bored expression.

“And I, Neville Longbottom, Future Lord of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Longbottom, voids all debts owed by House Potter to House Longbottom. So I swear by the power of my magic, so mote it be.”

The magical result was...non-existent. There were some golden and red sparks, but no lighting, tendril or rope of magic appeared to seal the deal.

“Well, this was really informative,” commented Alexandra Potter. “Now if you excuse me, I have other compartments to visit. Have a nice day.”

The doors closed and Ron swore something he had better not to shout in presence of Mrs. Weasley or any Professor.

“What in the name of Merlin just happened?” asked Leo nervously. The two Life-Debts should have been of the same intensity. Unless...”

The thought came to his mind, horrible and sudden.

“There are two possibilities,” the Boy-Who-Lived began in a trembling voice. “First, the fact James Potter isn’t the Lord of House Potter anymore makes his daughter unable to speak for his magic. As such, only the traitor can amend for his ignoble betrayal.”

It was possible. There were precedents in the previous centuries. And it was far better than the other possibility.

“And the other?” demanded Ron, who unlike Leo had not followed the process his thoughts were following.

“That James Potter never was our Secret Keeper...”

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The compartment where the Weasley Twins had decided to establish their mobile circus was pretty much the nightmare of any Prefect willing to keep his insignia. Mini-fireworks were exploding under the ceiling in bright sparkles and funny images. The ambiance was assured by a loud music which had certainly not been invented by a wizard or a witch but rather by a rock star. Several Expansion Charms had increased the size of their lair until it was large enough to receive twenty people with ease.

Alexandra had been satisfied by the idea of finally shutting this headache-inducing matter of Life-Debts, but even if she had been angry, the spectacle of this compartment would have forced a smile on her visage.

Like certain marvels of Hogwarts, the ambiance created by Fred and George made you remember that in the end, spell-casting was something truly magical. Wonder and fun in one package, not the terror and the prejudices which had reigned for several months as the heir of Slytherin struck relentlessly.

Of course, you had to stay on guard. The poor fourth-year Hufflepuff leaving at this instant the compartment was a striking example of this. At first glance, the brown-haired boy had come to buy a sample of the fireworks warming figuratively and literally the atmosphere. Somehow, Alexandra didn’t think it had been to receive dancing shoes levitating a few feet above the ground and a few rabbit parts like the tail and the ears giving him the looks of a rabbit-boy.

It went without saying her entrance was not unremarked in this realm where pranks and joke were the absolute religion.

“Ah Gred, the Dark Lady of Ravenclaw is honouring us of her terrifying presence...”

“Indeed Forge, indeed. No doubt she has only the vilest intentions towards us and our kingdom of happiness and freedom.”

Alexandra raised her eyes to the ceiling in amusement...which provided just enough warning time to avoid another firework exploding in her face.

 “I’m surprised no Prefect has arrived to shut down your little exhibition.”

“They’re all busy listening the droning of Saint Percy at the front of the train,” joyously replied Fred, seizing out of a bucket an animal which looked like a toad...except it was blue and making a lot of bubbles.

“You should have heard him these last days,” added George with feigned abject terror on his face. “He was standing like he was the Minister in front of his mirror, reciting by heart his seventeen minutes-speech...”

“This is the power of the Head Boy!” they both exclaimed in an improvised choreography.

“Another?” If she wasn’t mistaken, one of the Weasleys having already finished school had been one.

“Yes, another,” said George, his voice insincerely mourning. “But he will be the last!”

“Absolutely,” she agreed. Given her recent problems, Ginny Weasley was not going to volunteer for Prefect duty, especially when other girls last year had given her a very cold shoulder and treated her like a pestiferous being. As for Ronald Weasley...McGonagall had a lot of flaws but she didn’t think the Head of House for the Gryffindor Tower was raving mad. And that was what it would take to make the youngest Weasley boy a Prefect. “I notice you haven’t been given the Badge.”

“Well we made a lot of Humungous Bighead Badges,” Fred pointed with his wand to a stand of singing objects shouting various unflattering comments about the Prefects. “They are selling very well, at ten Knuts each. You can consider it our civic duty.”

Alexandra smirked sardonically.

“Civic duty towards natural disobedience?”

“Exactly!” George drank some liquid from a tea cup and for a moment his hairs almost caught flame and it was like he had been empowered by electricity before he retained a semi-normal appearance. Okay, semi-normal for a prankster.

“Our market studies are going to get really interesting this year,” announced Fred.

“You know, for most students OWL year is not a ‘market study’,” Alexandra couldn’t help but remark.

“Most students aren’t us!” Never truer words had been spoken. If the Weasley Twins became the new normal, the Professors would jump into the dark waters of the Black Lake. Or they would become insane by the end of the first week. “But we will need to be careful around Percy. He hasn’t completely forgiven us.”

“What did you do in Egypt? Throw several non-venomous snakes in his bed?”

“Nothing so terrible,” Fred said while making a bow which was genuinely insincere. “It was the worst luck that the gates of this pyramid just closed when he wasn’t paying attention...but Mum spotted the problem a minute later.”

“Fair warning: we know you may have intended to recruit in your little group; it isn’t going to work.”

Alexandra took one of the seats, taking care not to touch the bright orange pillows. Inside, she wasn’t that surprised. The Exiled had sent several messages to the potentially candidates: Percy’s answers had been extremely vague.

“May I ask why?”

“Of course you can, Dark Lady,” Fred auctioned a sort of gel-cascade near his trunk. “In a few words, Percy is ambitious.”

“He wants to enter the Ministry of Magic and become a junior clerk, assistant to the most boring persons imaginable in Britain.”

“But as the name Weasley is synonym with ‘blood-traitor’, he needs to be the perfect Head Boy and arrive at the top of the NEWTS rankings...”

“A noble goal,” she declared, “but one unlikely to be successful. The Ministry is taking people based on their familial ties more than their competence. If you want your skills to be recognised, I think Gringotts offers more career advancements possibilities...”

“Well to be fair to our grand and noble Head Boy, until his OWLS he wanted to be a wand-maker.” For once George’s voice was really serious. “Pretty ambitious of him too, but wand-makers are really rare and the shops are just familial dynasties under another name. Unless you are somebody’s ideal cousin, your chances are near-zero.”

“I guess you can’t learn the job without an Apprenticeship?”

The twins shook their heads in a firm ‘no’ at the same time. “Wand-crafting is one of the most secretive magical disciplines. It is not taught at Hogwarts, Beauxbatons or Durmstrang. And their Guild is prompt to enforce huge fines the moment they know someone is dabbling in their field. We have fake focuses to sell, but they’re just that, fake wands.”

“So poor Percy couldn’t be a wand-maker, so he decided that if he couldn’t create wands, he would have to enforce tyranny and law upon this poor Ministry,” Fred explained with a false tear around his left eye’s corner. “He has also a pretty girlfriend...he will have to remember to relax a bit, else she is going to leave him for someone funnier!”

 Alexandra declined a cup of tea, judging there was a good chance neither her hairs nor her skin colour would survive if she began to drink the mysterious liquid inside the recipient.

“As entertaining as it is, I must return to the subject of your sister. She and I had just a conversation I wanted to avoid for several decades.”

“Yeah,” and without warning the Weasley Twins were in ‘big brother protection mode’. “We will have to do something about Lord Yaxley before next summer, don’t we?”

“You realise his cousin is the new Chief Auror, right?” Alexandra didn’t ask if they knew the rumours Lord Yaxley was certainly a Death Eater; the twins were certainly better informed than her on this point.

“Sure,” Fred wasn’t impressed. “But he’s unlikely to stay in power for long with Fudge leading the sinking ship. Anyway, we will protect our sister. There are things more important than blood-tests in life.”

“If you say so,” The Potter Heiress knew a lot of pure-blood families would have reacted in a different manner.

“What is the Exchequer, by the way?” Ah yes, the question Alexandra dreaded.

“As far as I know, they are a mysterious group of Dark Lord and Ladies bent on dominating the world.”

“It’s not very original,” complained George, lighting on a dozen of fireworks.

“No, but unlike the local Death Eaters, I fear they have the means of their ambitions. We have strong suspicions they destroyed Nurmengard this summer, and the previous one, they pulverised a goblin fortress in France. They are responsible for hundreds of murders and are somewhat connected to Grindelwald. And they have been around for a very long time...”

Given the attentive expressions she watched on their visages, the Twins understood now how close they had been from seeing their family exterminated. The woman who had presented itself as the Queen of Exchequer had obliviated them; she could have easily slit their throats instead.

“Watch over your sister and your two brothers; I don’t know what their goal was, but I don’t think they intervened in this tomb just to affirm their ‘bad guys’ status. These people are not stupid like the version of Tom Riddle we met in the Chamber of Secrets.”

“Too bad, he gave us plenty of ideas with his ‘evil anagram’.”

Alexandra shook her head in wonder. Only the Weasley Twins would flee a dangerous battle and try to invent new products based on this experience. The next sentences were just Fred and George trying more and more hilarious word plays, mixed with the tortures, no the infamous pranks they had tested their older and younger brothers.

“But we are neglecting our duties, my ugly brother. We have a customer and we haven’t given her a chance to empty her purse.”

“Right you are my uglier brother. Surely our Dark Lady has the courage to buy one or two products?”

“Hmm...” she had not intended to purchase everything but a few Knuts were not going to ruin her.

“You said you had trick wands?”

Summoned faster than it took time to say it, Fred brought a pile of boxes with ‘Trick Wands’ written upon them in golden letters.

“Trick wands: they look like normal wands but the moment you try to channel magic in them, they transform into a rubber chicken,” presented George. “We are trying more elaborated versions at the moment, trying to increase the possibilities of transformations for the wand. These ones cost fifteen Knuts each.”

“Shut up and take my money,” joked the Ravenclaw witch. “Give me five of them, please.”

Money changed hands, and as Fred opened their ‘bank’ on top of his trunk, Alexandra saw the familiar glint of silver.

“Business is booming, I see.”

Fred grinned, though there was a hint of something unsatisfied behind the charming facade.

“We took the Floo to arrive at King’s Cross one hour before departure.”

“Mom was persuaded we were impatient to return to Hogwarts.”

“Well, we were my not-handsome brother. Impatient to sell our summer ‘homework’...”

At least they were doing things they liked, she supposed. Now that Alexandra thought about it, she would have to seriously think what sort of job and magic she wanted to have a career in after Hogwarts. As a third-year she had several years left, but it was better not to wait too long...

“It will be difficult to sell to your parents the collection of ‘Poor’ and ‘Dreadful’ you will get at your OWLS...”

 “It will be a difficult task, my Dark Lady,” said unctuously George. “But we don’t need these pesky Outrageous and Weird Lunatic Snakes to triumph over adversity. You don’t need OWLS to open a joke shop!”

Alexandra scratched her head. It was true technically. To open some shop, you just needed to be an adult and have the correct licences. Except for pranks, fireworks and the stuff, licences were uncommon and limited to prove you had an OWL in Herbology or Potion to manipulate correctly the ingredients. Zonko’s had cornered the market for so long, there was far less regulation than some other sectors like the broom-racing market. In theory, a competent research-and-development team needed an Artificer, but they were none in Britain.

So yes, in theory it could work. There was just the usual problem for projects of this magnitude and which was magnified for someone like the Weasleys.

Gold.

“You have the funds to rent a shop in one of the magical shop districts?”

If the answer was yes, the twins were far more successful than she had thought...

“No, not right now,” the admission was shrugged like it was nothing, but Fred and George were not in their happiness-unrestrained mood.

“We tried to convince Longbottom and Black last month at one of the meetings our parents went to. You know the ones we are supposed to think they are nice parties when they are in fact semi-official Order of the Phoenix recruitment meetings.”

“But we discovered Leo’s father was doing some control damage with Zonko’s. During the last one, Lord Black was convincing some of the associates present to buy some shares which had just been released on the market. It gave him bad publicity, you know.”

Alexandra showed her best ‘innocent’ visage to the Gryffindors.

“As a result, Lord Sirius Black has decided to prove his branch is not dead and a new generation of joke products should be released by Halloween. Supporters of the Light in and out of the Wizengamot are supposed to not step on his affairs...”

“So the Gryffindors we spoke to have all refused to finance our dream.”

That was very interesting, and in more way than one. Alexandra certainly didn’t care about the intricacies of the prank business, but the news the Order of the Phoenix was recruiting once more had to be taken seriously. As was the revelation the Light Lords of the Wizengamot were rallying around their banner-holders like Sirius Black...and in turn, to Dumbledore.

In all honesty, she didn’t care too much about the future of exotic games and jokes in Britain. But according to the information given by Lady Zabini, the joke shop of Zonko’s was running on fumes and shadows. And if they collapsed, it would be a black eye, pardon the pun, in the eyes of House Black.

“How much gold do you need?”

Fred and George wordlessly communicated with each other in this manner only twins appear able to do before George replied.

“Two thousand and five hundred Galleons,” the two announced in a chorus.

Alexandra hissed in appreciation. This was not an extravagant sum – the brand-new Firebolt was over eight thousand Galleons for example – but for most students’ pockets, it was an unreachable threshold.

Supporting them was carrying a significant risk, then. On the other hand, she had just received twenty-five thousand Galleons from the sale of the Zonko’s shares. Two thousand and five hundred was a small percentage of this sum.

Now she had just to convince her guardian spending that much money was a wise project.

“Okay,” and for certainly the first time, Alexandra had the pleasure to see the Twin terrors of Gryffindor in a genuine state of stupefaction. “I’m in.”

“Just like that?” blurted Fred. Oh, Alexandra was going to have to invest in a photo as soon as possible. Not being able to take a picture of their faces was a big opportunity missed.

“Well, this is the accord of principle,” she told them. “I have the money to cover your expenses, but I will need a few documents and demonstrations to convince my guardian. Lady Zabini has made clear I am to consult her if I want to spend a lot of gold, so let’s do it seriously. Starting a business will require me to at least debate the modalities of the investment, the buildings you want to rent and the first products you want to commercialise. We can do the basics during September and if everything works fine, we will contact lawyers to put everything on good parchment during the Hogsmeade weekends.”

If anything, her logic seemed to have convinced the Weasley twins she wasn’t playing a big trick on them. Hands were shaken to seal the deal and Fred showed her a few more products before she went out.

“Thank you, most Fabulous and Generous Dark Lady!” they bowed and re-bowed as she left the musical compartment, leaving the couple of Gryffindors waiting outside wondering if they were not prone to hallucinations.

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The Ice Queen of Slytherin didn’t greet Blaise with a scowl, but he had sufficient experience with her to know the freezing glare he received was not a happy welcome.

“You’re late.”

“Apologies, but there was interesting gossip coming from Malfoy’s little court.”

The blue eyes became colder, if it was magically possible.

“I doubt whatever Malfoy has to say is valuable.”

“In normal circumstances, you would be right,” Blaise answered carefully. “But this time Draco is the mouthpiece for his father, and according to him the Tri-Wizard Tournament is going to be reinstated next year.”

“Oh it’s going to be so exciting!” said Tracey. Blaise gasped mentally at the energy of the Slytherin girl.

Daphne’s judgement was far more vitriolic.

“It’s sheer stupidity. Neither Hogwarts nor the Ministry have the funds to organise an inter-school Tournament this decade.”

“Yes and this why we aren’t going to be the hosts this edition. Dumbledore proposed it of course, but the other three schools refused and there was an ICW vote on the subject a few days ago. The new ‘European Magical Tournament’ will be held on lands of the Ministries of Venice and Italy.”

“Venice and Italy...” the Greengrass Heiress touched her faint rosy lips in deep thought. “This is the Scuola Regina we’re talking about, right?”

Blaise didn’t show it outwardly, but inside he was deeply impressed by the blonde-haired Slytherin general knowledge. Most Hogwarts students were unable to quote the name of two foreign schools by their fourth year. He nodded to confirm the guess.

“What does it mean, Daphne?”

The Ice Queen clicked her fingers with a stormy air on her visage.

“The continental nations want a challenge to see how low we have fallen after our civil war. I suppose Beauxbatons and Durmstrang are the two other invited schools?”

“Yes they are.”

Daphne Greengrass sighed loudly, an extraordinary lapse of behaviour with her.

“We are in a dire situation.”

“Come on Daphne,” encouraged Tracey, ever the voice of optimism. “Hogwarts has some talents to show off! We have the Boy-Who-Lived, the Golden Trio, the Weasley Twins, the Exiled Queen...”

“This is not a game, Tracey!” the snarl of the Ice Queen was back. “These tournaments are always causing dozens of painful deaths and you face the elite of the other schools in front of multiple judges. You are not graded on your number of pranks and detentions or your skill to evade Filch hunting you in the corridors. You have to accomplish arduous tasks in front of thousands of spectators and show Guild masters and wizards renowned to be the best in their field your magical prowess. Now tell me, is Hogwarts hiding a lot of those potential Champions?”

Seen from this point of view...no. And Blaise knew his fellow Slytherin third-year had not mentioned a lot of problems. British wizards had an infamous tendency towards isolationism and the last war against a Dark Lord had not changed opinions, with all the foreign mercenaries flocking to You-Know-Who’s banner. Many families were going to be utterly against the idea of risking their Heirs and Heiresses in a foreign-organised contest. Fifth and seventh-years were going to listen politely and certainly decide OWLS and NEWTS were more important than a violent death.

One more time, Blaise wondered what Dumbledore had in mind to agree to this disastrous idea. After the Basilisk problem, a return to tranquillity should have been the choice of wisdom...

“What were you talking about before my arrival?” He asked, trying to mollify a bit the wrathful Ice Queen.

“She was telling me of her nefarious plans for the group projects of this year,” Tracey revealed in a mischievous tone.

Blaise yawned in disinterest.

“Group projects are a waste of time for the Professors and students. Decades ago, they were useful and if you failed to present something at the end of the year, you were sure to repeat the year. But now no one cares anymore.”

Group projects had begun with excellent intentions near the 1800s. Trio of students were created and the third-years wizards and witches were required to expand their knowledge and mastery of magic together in a grand project. It could be in Potions, Arithmancy, Runes, Transfiguration or multiple classes at once. You had until the Winter Holidays to get the approval of the Professor teaching the subject you were working on and present the final version at the end of the year. It could be long rolls of parchment disserting on an ancient war; it also could be a magical duel demonstrating the mastery of several DADA spells.

But like in many things, the current Headmaster had destroyed the system. And extraordinarily, he had done this in one measure. After the 1950s, students were still free to choose their group partners. But in the name of ‘school unity’, ‘no member of the same group was to be from the same House’.

It had more or less killed the entire program in a couple of years. The majority of the Professors had stopped to involve themselves when most of the groups failed routinely to decide on a subject before the deadline. Slytherins and Ravenclaws refused to work with Gryffindors. Hufflepuffs attacked in pack the Slytherins insulting them behind their backs.

Ultimately, group projects could earn you a grade with a coefficient equal or superior to the fundamental classes...but about nine in ten groups practised a fourth-year spell, wrote an essay on it and stopped after the teacher graded their work at year’s end – where before these group solidarity was continuing until seventh year.

Blaise knew this, and he knew Daphne knew this too. With these clues, the plan of the Ice Queen was evident.

“I don’t think Potter will want you in her group, Daphne.”

“Yeah, I was telling her the same thing!” Tracey commented and Greengrass threw a betrayed look at her friend before fixing Blaise with her frigid blue eyes.

“Since you are our expert on the Exiled by default, tell me, oh Zabini Heir, your alternative plan.”

In good Slytherin, the son of Stella Zabini knew this was the moment you had not to show your smugness.

“Since you asked politely...Alexandra Potter in the last days was not uninterested at the idea of learning Dementor-repulsive spells like the Patronus.”

“Everybody who is aware Dementors will be at Hogwarts this year wants to be able to cast these incantations, Blaise.” The black-skinned boy didn’t dispute Tracey’s point. “But Patronus and Ecclesial are NEWTS-level and we will be lucky if we can send mist in classroom conditions by June.”

Blaise opened the package of a Chocolate Frog and devoured the sweet in one go.

“Yes, something less complicated should be better, like the Summoning Charm...”

“You forget, Daphne, that Potter and her friends are Ravenclaws. We aren’t friends, but I can tell you they aren’t underachievers. If you propose a project the Exiled Queen will finish in ten minutes, she’s going to laugh and go to the Hufflepuffs, because let’s face it, the duffers are no geniuses but at least she knows they will be hard-working.”

It was amusing to see the wheels turning behind the cold facade of the Greengrass Heiress.

“What about leverage? Is there anything we could use?”

 Blaise tried to remember the last week at Zabini Manor but there were few things which were useful. Neither Daphne nor Tracey were going to join what Potter considered ‘light exercise in sports’ and it was out of question to offer an animal when the Exiled Queen had a diva-owl and a carnivorous bat for pets.

“Ah yes, Mother told her to learn French for the next holidays. We may celebrate the December holidays on the continent.”

The worst part was that it applied to him too, and unfortunately he had...skimmed a bit the lessons on the frog-eaters’ language.

The Ice Queen reacted more positively to this information.

“I have the basics for French...though my parents were more interested in teaching me German and Nordic dialects when I was young.”

So the Lord and Lady of House Greengrass had at one point or another during her childhood thought to send her to Durmstrang, interesting.

“Any other brilliant idea?”

“Well, you can always try the seduction approach...” Oops, judging by the cold glare he received, he had gone too far.

“Tracey, hex him please.”

“OUCH!”

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There was a small pile of sweets when Alexandra came back in the compartment. The trolley lady had visited them, and it looked like Morag had decided to pour a lot of pocket money in sweets, drinks and pastries. Lyre had also departed before her return, maybe to join the rest of the Slytherin second-years.

“We were beginning to think you were lost somewhere...”

“My visit to the lair of the Twin Terrors took longer than predicted,” said the Potter Heiress before throwing one False Wand to each member of the Exiled and placing the last one in her trunk for Lyre. In a matter of seconds, there were four large rubber ducks in the compartment. Fred and George had charmed them to give the appropriate wild sounds expected for one of their products. “And I was intercepted by Longbottom and his most loyal lieutenants of the Golden Trio.”

“What did the New Marauders want?” The tone employed by Nigel pronounced the nickname was not complimentary.

“The Boy-Who-Lived wanted to settle the matter of Life-Debts. By the way, there’s now a fifty-fifty chance James Potter wasn’t the Secret Keeper of the Longbottoms...”

“It cost you a Life-Debt,” said Morag in a disapproving tone once she had finished reciting the conversation with appropriate expressions and gestures.

“You are looking at it the wrong way. I trust the Golden Trio as much as I trust certain Slytherins and I certainly don’t want them to give me more headaches than in the two previous years. By releasing the Life-Debt, Longbottom and his friends will turn their attention to other witches and wizards.”

“It’s really the first time I heard someone describing Life-Debts in negative terms,” affirmed Nigel.

“Don’t take it wrong, but unless the person saving your life is a dear friend, I don’t think Life-Debts are by nature a good thing. I know it is in the customs of this world and everything, but it will and can create tensions where gratitude by escaping death should be the only consideration,” maybe she was wrong, but Alexandra could see it too easily how such a burden could transform day after day a half-functional relationship in deep hate.

The next hours were spent eating and discussing her likely participation in the Weasleys’ business of trick and prank. Hermione was unsurprisingly the least supportive: a shop owned by Fred and George was the next best thing to a chaos-worshipping altar for Hogwarts.

“And if their shop idea doesn’t work, they will be out of options and without a sufficient number of OWLS...”

“You’re too dramatic, Hermione. The twins are resourceful...can’t guarantee they will do a lot of legal activities if their first idea fail, though.”

The sunny weather was a dying dream, alas. As they left the populated plains and hills, the landscape was now discovered under very dark clouds and a lack of light inspiring nothing good.

“I really hope it isn’t going to rain when we walk to the carriages,” Morag told the three other Exiled. “Abusing the Warming and Cleaning Charms before the Welcoming Feast isn’t my idea of fun.”

“And just think about the first-year kids who have to cross the lake in the boats,” Hermione bit her lips in concentration, trying to see something in the darkening atmosphere. Vain efforts, especially as a light rain began to fall and the windows of the Hogwarts Express were drenched in a matter of minutes.

And then the train’s speed began to decrease.

“It’s half an hour too soon to be Hogwarts.”

“Alexandra is right: there’s no village or any lights there. There’s just darkness.”

Alexandra shivered. For a second, she didn’t understand why then walking to the window she placed her hand against the glass; it was freezing cold. By simple logic, this was either the most peculiar fall of temperature in known history and it was happening in an area centred on the Hogwarts Express or...

“Morag, grab your sword. Nigel, Hermione, your wands.”

“What is happening?”

“The cousins of the Nazgûl, the Dementors, have decided to pay us a little visit. And they have come in legion numbers.”

“Surely no one is stupid enough to believe the former Azkaban prisoners are in this train!”

“Fudge is a moron...”

The train completely stopped. The air became even colder and the bottles of orange juice not drunk began to freeze. There was one large shock, then two others. Alexandra’s grip around Fragarach became harder. Crookshanks began to hiss threateningly in Hermione’s arms and Nigel had his Firecrab-hybrid to warm himself...

“By the Morrigan, they are coming aboard the train...” it seemed someone in the Ministry had indeed proved incompetence and stupidity were an assurance to be promoted. The moment she could go to the Owlery, Alexandra swore she was going to a letter to Lady Zabini and asks for this person to be fired...

The lights of the Hogwarts went out. Oh she hated this. She couldn’t cast an Ecclesial or a Patronus to save her life and the monsters were coming. Fragarach in one hand, she levitated her trunk and seized with her other hand a little pouch. Pulverised dragon scales added to unicorn hair. On their own, these materials were completely useless. But Fragarach’s blade was enchanted *Argetlam*, a level-three Alchemic component and when it was put in contact with powerful magical essences...

Darkness came. The comparison with the Nazgûl was sadly terribly adequate. It was like the shadow itself was source of cold, terror and despair.

By sheer instinct, Alexandra threw the powder she had prepared on the blade and instantly her sword provided a source of light as bright green flames danced from the guard to the edge.

It did not stop the Dementor. The door of the compartment, and she was sure they had locked it thoroughly, was opening finger by finger. A skeletal hand protruded from the cloak...and then she heard the screams. Agony screams, screams of battle...

“*No, not my daughter...*”

“*For the blood*!”

“*Kill them all, no prisoners*...”

“*Fools, you will embrace the darkness*...”

Alexandra pointed the blade at the Dementor with what strength she had left. Why was it so cold? Cold, cold...

“Return to the darkness, spectre of Azkaban!” Her voice seemed far and distant.

“*If you let my daughter go*...”

The voice resonated like a chorus of the damned.

**MORDRED**

**MORDRED**

**MORDRED**

Alexandra held Fragarach and struck the Dementor. The demon shrieked in pain, before beginning to burn in green flames. And suddenly the cold atmosphere wasn’t so cold anymore. The Dementor shrieked horribly, but the sound, far from horrifying her, gave everyone courage. Morag stuck the monster with her family’s sword and Alexandra struck it a second time. Hermione and Nigel bombarded it with their Lumos. And after ten seconds, the cloak fell to the ground, empty of darkness and with nothing to show of the demon hiding within it.

Alexandra felt triumph. They had done it. They had killed a Dementor...

“They are leaving...”

It was like a cloud of darkness was lifted and fled the Hogwarts Express in a torrent of outraged shrieks...or whatever equivalent of feelings existed in the void hearts of these demons.

“Thanks the Valar, we had not to fight them all...”

Alexandra was not sure even Dumbledore could have won against the army of darkness which had just departed.

The lights were switched on. The train began to move again. The cloak of the Dementor continued to burn in green flames until nothing was left and Hermione whispered an advanced water-based spell.

“Unbelievable, there was no one to protect us if the monster had...” Hermione didn’t manage to finish the sentence and shivered.

Alexandra took three Chocolate Frogs and ate them one by one. By the third, she felt a bit better.

“I heard...people screaming. I think...I heard my mother.” The admission escaped her.

“I’m sorry, Alexandra.”

“It was terrible,” Nigel looked deathly pale and they had to force him to take several sweets for him to regain some colour. “I heard insults and angry voices...it was like I was never going to be happy again...”

They had been exposed to a single Dementor and only for a few seconds at close distance. If they had been two, it was likely the demons could have sucked their souls or tormented them as long as they wished.

Azkaban had hundreds of these creatures floating in the foundations and above the fortress. The Ministry prison had to be a living hell. For not the first time, the Potter Heiress promised herself she would never let the Ministry take her to the Nordic island if for one reason or another they decided to get rid of her. There were things far more terrible than death...an imprisonment at Azkaban was one of them.

About twenty minutes later, the Hogwarts Express finally stopped at Hogwarts Station. The descent from the train was done in a muted silence, though even as disturbed by her recent close-death experience, Alexandra could see the rumours of summer and previous years were spreading as older and younger students pointed fingers in her direction or stopped talking the instant she passed before them to reach the carriages.

It had to be their most pitiful arrival at Hogwarts of the three. While the castle was shining and an atmosphere of feast and warmth was felt, the shouts of excitation were subdued. They ignored some exclamations behind them – Alexandra thought she heard Malfoy’s voice but tonight the stupidity of the blonde-haired snake could wait. The Exiled marched in the Great Hall and took their seats.

“I hope the Sorting isn’t going to take too long, I need warm food badly,” muttered Morag.

The opening of the great doors to reveal Professor Flitwick leading the first-years killed this hope. In 1991, there had been forty-five students to be Sorted by the Hat – and they were forty-four left now as Byron Vaisley had been killed last year. But the size of their generation was small, since they were the last children who were conceived and/or born as the war provoked by Voldemort still raged. The new 1993 students were approximately ninety-plus...maybe there was hope to reuse all these empty classrooms where ghosts and old memories were the only visitors.

Although Alexandra wondered where McGonagall had gone, during the previous years, she had been under the impression it was the tradition for the Deputy headmistress to welcome the students after Hagrid’s unforgettable boat travel on the Black Lake. Twenty-four new Ravenclaws joined their House, their eyes full of stars and watching their new surroundings with delights.

Alexandra’s stomach was growling when the Sorting ended. Incidentally, McGonagall chose this moment to come back with a man looking like a parody of wizard in red robes and the Golden Trio on their heels.

“What have they done again?” asked Nigel.

“I don’t know, but it looks like it has greatly amused Malfoy...” The Malfoy Heir was smirking like his birthday had come early and he was busy doing weird gestures which amused the small entourage of Slytherins who could bear his presence.

Albus Dumbledore rose from his throne and the flow of whispers and small talk stopped like a button had been pushed. The Headmaster had not changed at all since her guardianship audience. His silver hairs accompanied the typical grandfather glasses and a crooked nose of politician.

“Welcome! Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast...”

The man was good, Alexandra had to give him this. The moment he had begun smiling and speaking, the cold had vanished into nothingness and the problems of the train were so distant...

Dumbledore cleared his throat before continuing.

“As you will be aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the Dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry of Magic business. They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises – or even Invisibility Cloaks. It is not in the nature of a Dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. I look to the Prefects, and our new Head Boy and Girl, to make sure that no student runs foul of the Dementors.”

Percy Weasley looked like someone had suddenly proclaimed him the new Minister of Magic. It was not a huge bet his younger brothers were going to be on the war path to deflate his sizeable ego.

“On a happier note, I am pleased to welcome three new teachers to our ranks this year. First is Professor Wilhelmina Grubby-Plank has agreed to take the job of Care of Magical Creatures teacher. Professor Kettleburn retired at the end of last year to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs but I have no doubt you will enjoy greatly her lessons on unicorns and other interesting animals of our country.”

The Hogwarts students and Professors clapped politely. The woman’s name had come back several times in discussions before summer. That she was the new Care teacher was thus no surprise. On the other hand, she remained an unknown quantity and her popularity – or unpopularity – was going to be built on the first classes of September.

“Second and third, Professors Rincewind and Podmore have kindly consented to fill the two posts of Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers.”

The applause was rather scattered and unenthusiastic. It was mainly the Hufflepuffs giving a warm welcome. The Ravenclaws by principle were unable to cheer. The ‘Rincewind’ man had clothes which were so crass the man was insult to fashion by any European cultural standard. Worse, he had a large ‘WIZZARD’ on his horrible hat. The Slytherins were openly sniggering as they weren’t going to wear these red robes or anything so worn a single day in their lives. And the Gryffindors...for some reason, they looked really afraid, like they had already met him before.

“I am ready to bet a Galleon we weren’t the only ones to have problems with Dementors on the train...” she whispered to Hermione.

“We will learn of it tomorrow. Thanks to Lavender, the entire castle will know of these events tomorrow at lunch.”

“The Quidditch Captains will be advised by their Heads of House to form their teams quickly, as the Department of Sports and Games has manifested an interest in recruiting new talents and the school matches will consequently be organised earlier in the season than their traditional week-ends of play. Well I think that’s everything of importance! Let the feast begin!”

The Headmaster finished speaking and the four great tables began to cover in succulent delicacies. Plates were filled with meat, fish, eggs and vegetables among hundreds of different meals. Goblets were filled with drink going from the pumpkin to the pear juice. It was a delicious feast and for the long hour it lasted Alexandra allowed herself to forget the problems of outside. She and Morag browbeat Antony Goldstein into carrying several toasts to the victory of the Irish Quidditch Team at the next World Cup.

But everything had to end. The cakes and pies were swallowed at a legendary speed and suddenly the Professors were rising and it was time to go to the Common Rooms. The progression on the principal path to Ravenclaw Tower was so slow Alexandra almost fell asleep before she saw the entrance.

The green-eyed witch was completely exhausted. So exhausted the fact her new bedroom was shared with Morag and Hermione was simply dismissed as unimportant. Fragarach was thrown under her bed, she missed half of a comment – was Morag complimenting her on her new nightclothes and the Basilisk-slayer jumped on the bed she no longer considered the best in existence. Less than a minute after her head hit the pillow, Alexandra was sleeping soundly and short of a cannon detonation noise, few things in this world would be able to wake her up.