**Chapter 56**

**The Definition of Disaster**

**4 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The article was definitely not pleasant to read.

**FROM PRANKS TO MURDER PRANKS: TWO GRYFFINDORS SPREAD THE FLAMES OF VIOLENCE**

*For the last couple of years, House Gryffindor has been renowned by all students to be more concerned with its goals to turn the hair of boys and girls red than improve their Potion grades. Countless complaints were made to Heads of House and Professors, but few results came out of them. While some incidents were amusing, many events could have been regarded as severe breaches of the Hogwarts Charter if regarded with a sharp eye.*

*The preferred targets of this group of pranksters, known as the ‘New Marauders’ named for a previous group of Gryffindors also known for their rule-breaking tendencies, are of course the Slytherin. It has long been suspected in the corridors of this noble institution that the pranksters didn’t care very much if their victims had one or more relatives suspected to have sided with You-Know-Who during the war; judging by the randomness of their attacks across all the students of Salazar Slytherin’s House, the guilty Gryffindors attacked the first Slytherins they met, raising tensions and provoking incidents which did nothing to restore an atmosphere of calm and serenity in our school.*

*Yesterday marked a grave escalation on the part of the Gryffindors. After the invasion of the pitch by Dementors caused the excellent Quidditch team of Captain Oliver Wood to lose the game, Mr. Leo Black and Mr. Ronald Weasley decided to avenge this loss to their ‘honour’ by pouring numerous Potions and prank food items in the food waiting for Ravenclaw House in their Common Room. At no moment did they bothered to check that these prank foods and drinks couldn’t be dangerous poisons once eaten or drunk. At no moment did they think to bring antidotes with them. The two third-year Gryffindors violated the sanctity of the Ravenclaw Common Room, and when the prank turned to nightmare, tried to flee under an Invisibility Cloak, which revealed itself to be a stolen Heirloom belonging to another Most Ancient House.*

*The number of rules and laws broken to accomplish this disgusting deed is astronomical and we can only pray the Headmaster and the Board of Governors will take severe action...*

Neville stopped his perusal of the *Loud Duck* to ask Parvati, who was waiting a couple of feet away from his infirmary bed.

“Please tell me the ‘official newspaper’ has become completely delirious on its third edition,” the future Lord of House Longbottom declared in a pleading tone.

Lavender and Seamus snorted on the other side of the bed. In the end, it was the Gossip Queen of Gryffindor Tower who answered.

“Sure. But if the authors have drunk a Confusion Draught, then the rest of the school has also been drinking the same thing. Leo and Ron truly were caught doing the very things they’re accused of. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Professor Flitwick so furious when he escorted them to the Headmaster’s office...”

Lavender’s voice trailed off and Neville rapidly hid a wince. The New Marauders had not checked the items they had unofficially taken from Zonko. Why should they have? Everything they had obtained was destined to be sold, and the prank shop was not going to sell goods which didn’t respect their sale pitch, was it?

And now everything appeared to have gone to hell while he was unconscious in the Infirmary Wing. If someone asked him one day how much things could turn badly when you were unconscious for twelve hours, Neville would point at that day. What sort of madness had seized Leo and Ron? The prank stocks they had had were supposed to be used against House Slytherin, not Ravenclaw, and certainly not on the evening of a Quidditch match! This was sure to anger an entire House against you!

“What possessed them to attack Ravenclaw House in the first place?” the Boy-Who-Lived was forced to ask aloud to the boys and girls sharing his House colours in third year. “I mean, yes, I am not happy we lost against their team, but unless you found proof the Ravenclaws made a ritual to attack the stands and the pitch to avoid defeat, I don’t see how they’re at fault.”

“Leo and Ron thought Potter could have saved you from your massive fall from your broom,” said Dean, an apologetic expression on his face. “They thought that if she had not been busy saving Cho Chang from her fall, she could have saved you.”

That was making less and less sense. Neville pinched his skin, but the pain was real. If this was all a bad dream, then it was a very realistic one.

“Why would they believe that? Of course Potter is going to try to save her own teammates first...and given the weather conditions, it’s likely she didn’t even know it was me she had to save.”

Thelma quickly nodded, making tiny twirls of her wand to calm her nerves.

“We would have said the same thing...besides Potter ruined her broom slowing Chang’s fall and smashing into the ground. She certainly wasn’t going to have the means or the time to save you too.”

The Gryffindor girl swallowed heavily.

“But they certainly didn’t ask our opinion on the subject. When we searched for them after the game, they were already gone and we never thought, well...”

Yeah, Neville understood it very well. They had never thought, even with rage, anger, and madness pushing them that his two friends could behave like perfect imbeciles.

“This is a disaster.” He was forced to admit, if an updating dictionary landed on his lap right now, he would recommend giving a picture to provide the illustration next to the definition of the word.

“It’s worse than that,” countered Lavender, and to his despair, Parvati and everyone around his bed didn’t voice any objection. “They found most of your stocks in the dungeons and all over the school, Neville. By solidarity, I and Parvati got rid of a lot of evidence in the Tower, but we couldn’t do anything for your...pre-studies with the Animagus transformation.”

“Okay, that’s bad, but it’s not...”

“The Invisibility Cloak you used for all your pranks? It belonged to House Potter before the Headmaster gave it illegally to you?”

“WHAT?”

It had to be a mistake. Please let it be a mistake...or a nightmare.

“You didn’t know,” Parvati affirmed more than she demanded.

“Of course I didn’t know!” he snarled despite all his efforts to retain his composure. “I mean, I knew the Cloak was powerful, but I assumed it was a treasure Professor Dumbledore had found in one of his expeditions against Dark Wizards in Europe or a gift from an extinct House. I had no idea...I know the fines and the problems you can get in if the Wizengamot decides you’re guilty of stealing the Houses’ treasured possessions!”

After all, a lot of Death Eaters who had been sent directly to Azkaban had been caught because they had ravaged and pillaged the manors of Light and Grey Houses. The Wizengamot didn’t care much about Muggle-born murders, but they very much insisted the rights of their representatives were upheld at all costs.

“I will have to apologise to Potter.” Neville said after a few seconds.

The grimaces he received in return weren’t encouraging at all.

“That is...not a good idea,” advised Parvati. “Leo got in his head to take the blame for a lot of illegal things your trio did, and that included receiving the Cloak from Dumbledore’s hands. And apparently, he had his doubts about the Invisibility Cloak.”

The hesitation on the Indian-born witch’s visage was a big warning sign very bad things had already happened.

“He tried to apologise to Potter before two Aurors escorted him back to the Tower...it was...bad.”

Seamus guffawed.

“Bad. Bad, she says...Merlin and Morgana, if there hadn’t been any witnesses, I’m not sure Leo would have finished this conversation in one piece. Potter looked like she was ready to burn him alive and MacDougal had to drag her away before she drew her wand and hexed him on the spot.”

Neville closed his eyes, trying to know what had passed through Leo’s head. His grandmother had drilled into him several protocols for these situations, but he rather doubted Leo had used them. And now the actions of yesterday had practically guaranteed every Ravenclaw was going to look at House Gryffindor and see ‘mortal enemies’.

And as for Alexandra Potter...he had tried to maintain a neutral stance with her and her ‘Exiled’ from the beginning of the year, but in a single event it was obvious that between the Cloak and the incident, relationships had been burned to the point of no return.

This was a catastrophic disaster. Part of him was amazed how things could have turned so wrong in a few hours. Two days ago, they had been preparing to win the first Quidditch game which was hopefully going to be the first step in the long-awaited Cup victory Gryffindor had desired for so many years and they were going to catch the eye of the recruiters present.

Now he had failed to catch the Snitch, he was humiliated by this weakness which caused him to collapse every time a Dementor got close to him, he had heard the last words of his mother as she gave her life for him, they had lost the game, and his friends had behaved like Potter had tried to kill him while the rest of Gryffindor had seen nothing of the sort. House Gryffindor’s reputation was now in tatters and for long, long months, pranks and midnight explorations were going to be out of the question.

“Where are Leo and Ron?” he asked, giving back the newspaper to Lavender. “I want to speak to them.”

“That’s going to be difficult,” retorted the blonde. “Right now, they must be at a Department of Education’s audience in London. And after, it’s unlikely they will come back. They were forced to pack their trunks last night; they are suspended from Hogwarts.”

“How bad?” At least his friends hadn’t been expelled...though he had the feeling that if the list of accusations was as long as it was implied in the newspaper, they were quite lucky in that regard.

“The Board and Professor Dumbledore haven’t announced their final decision...but Ron will not come back until early December in the most optimistic scenario and Leo will be lucky if he is authorised to take his exams in the same room as us next May.”

Three months and the next best thing to a school year...damn it, Warrington and his friend they had caught in Death Eater robes had not been suspended for that long.

“I suppose there are no possibilities to decrease their suspension?”

Damn it, Leo was probably going to be forced to begin his third year a second time. As a pure-blood he could normally use magic at home whenever he wanted, but suspended students were subjected to a far higher degree of scrutiny than the usual surveillance from the Ministry.

“None, all the Ravenclaw parents assailed the castle with Howlers this morning at breakfast, we were lucky no one decided to storm the castle...”

That was really an incentive to stay in Madam Pomfrey’s care for a few days...except he was healed and ready to go. Merlin’s staff, he was not really looking forwards to his return to the Tower.

“Give me all the other bad news.” Since there was no point delaying the mountain of problems, he might as well learn all of them in a single hour.

“Okay, where to begin? The Board is seriously investigating whether they must find a replacement for Professor McGonagall as Head of Gryffindor House or not. The Ministry is pushing for Professor Dumbledore to resign from his position of Grand Sorcerer...”

**5 October 1993, Hogsmeade, Scotland**

Alexandra had not expected return to Hogsmeade for financial and money purposes soon after her first week-end there. First, because as the Weasley Twins had correctly predicted, the second week-end Hogwarts students were authorised to leave the castle was at Samhain. Secondly, the reality was she couldn’t afford supporting shop creation like the ones Fred and George wanted to build every week – if she didn’t see profits for the next two years, sooner or later her gold reserves were going to look rather depleted.

But really, this was Hogwarts. The unexpected could strike at any hour, and the impossible intervened at least twice per year. You could go to your bed assured of your final triumph and wake up the next day a pariah. You could be accused of petrifying students without a single proof against you. You could be fired for not doing your job when at least a tenth of the teaching staff routinely failed to teach their classes the very subject they were specialised in.

This month looked like a good example of shattered order. Not one hundred days into the school year, and Hogwarts was already looking like someone had let a rock fall upon an anthill. The Board of Governors was trying to unearth everything which could make their venerable Headmaster sink his reputation lower. Everyone was blaming the Lions for their hot-headed imbeciles and the fact no one had been selected to play in a professional Quidditch Team.

Slytherins were gloating at the humiliation of their rivals, and Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were engaged in a contest to see who could glare in the harshest fashion at the inhabitants of Gryffindor Tower. Naturally, Nott and a few of his lackeys had decided to continue the now-established tradition of ‘oh, Longbottom, a Dementor, quick, run before you faint!’ and the ‘OOOHHH’ were accompanying the Boy-Who-Lived wherever he marched.

To sum up, Hogwarts was in chaos and for the moment, classes were momentarily suspended for the next days as the Professors were trying to cope with the Board demands, the Ministry employees arriving and departing by the dozen, and the voluminous discipline cases they had been handed in the persons of Ronald Weasley and Leo Black.

And she was back in the same room as before, only the Weasley Twins weren’t present, Andromeda Tonks had brought a far more imposing pile of parchment, and there was also her guardian present this time.

The orders of the day were obviously to embarrass her about her relationship with Susan and to inform her she was officially filthy rich.

For the record, Alexandra wasn’t sure whose topic was the most embarrassing, such was the way Stella Zabini had presented them.

“Now we have thoroughly verified you’re a responsible young girl,” purred the Black Widow. As usual, the robe she wore was a mix of beautiful and indecent, and yes it was something included in an autumn collection, a green robe and other accessories which made a sure bet a wizard somewhere was going to try to wed her before the Winter Holidays. “We must speak of your finances. Andromeda?”

The Tonks witch stood and placed in front of her a long official parchment written in official red ink and with what was apparently the seal of a certain Albus Percival Dumbledore. Oh, and there was a mighty big sum in the centre.

Four million three hundred seventy-nine thousand and one hundred Galleons in repayment for the ‘loaning’ of her Invisibility Cloak.

“Wow, he really paid that without fighting it in front of a tribunal?”

“The poor man hadn’t a choice, Alexandra.” A deaf man wouldn’t have been able to miss the satisfaction in her guardian’s voice. “I demanded the upper sum per Ministry regulations. If he had tried to fight it in court, I could have demanded more, and all the evidence was against him this time.”

“There is also the fact the way he threaded around his oaths was close to the breaking point,” added Andromeda. “If he had tried to resist, it’s entirely possible his own magic would have punished him...and the Wizengamot and several other assemblies he is an honorary member of would not have hesitated in ejecting him from his prestigious positions. As it is, he will certainly lose his Grand Sorcerer title before we celebrate the New Year.”

Several years ago, she would have felt some sympathy for the man...but this was before knowing he had kept her family Cloak for over a decade, and this evil son of a bitch had certainly not tried to prostrate himself in front of her and apologised in public. In fact, he hadn’t done it in private either. One of the rare things she was certain of was that Albus Dumbledore was undoubtedly regretting at this hour having given the Cloak to the Golden Trio given the problems they had caused to his purse and his power base.

But that was all she was certain of. The man didn’t look remorseful for what he had done when she had seen him this morning eating at the Head Table.

“Conditions?” She was forced to ask, right?

“Well, the Ministry and the goblins will take their part, of course,” the smile on Andromeda’s lips was thin and slightly ironic. “Still, even when everything is paid and the other lawyers Stella hired have taken their part, you will have a bit over four million Galleons left.”

Phew, that was...that was a lot of money. Okay, it was a very large mountain of money. Soon she was going to beat Smaug and his Erebor treasure. Little reminder, find a book and see if hydras like dragons loved to sleep in a cavern full of priceless gemstones and golden and silver coins.

“The Ministry, alas, has some restricting laws we must abide with,” continued her cousin and lawyer. “Since an ancient law was used to create a Dowry vault, you will have to transfer one hundred thousand Galleons to Vault 517 of Gringotts London. Similarly, as you are technically not the Lady of your House at the time we speak, you will also have to send one hundred thousand Galleons to Vault 72, the familial vault of House Potter.”

Alexandra breathed loudly as the hydra hissed in anger in her lungs, but a mental subtraction informed her she still had a good pile of gold available. No reason to panic...but every reason to remember that really, whatever happened, Dumbledore had tried to screw her in every possible manner and it was only justice he had been caught red-handed after so long.

“Okay, that will leave around three million and eight hundred thousand Galleons, right?” As the two women nodded in agreement, the Ravenclaw black-haired witch continued, “I suppose it is best I transfer them to the Paris vault I own, no?”

“If it is your choice, we will of course transfer your funds there,” said Andromeda Tonks, “but Stella has another strategy in mind, doesn’t she?”

Lady Zabini laughed and for a second or two the hydra hissed, trying to tell her something...but it was gone as soon as it had appeared, and Alexandra winced as what looked to be a lot of official bank advertisements arrived close to her.

“I indeed have a different proposal for you. Before September, I didn’t suggest you open a new vault in another country. It wasn’t worth the investment, frankly, and the times seemed relatively untroubled. But a lot of things are changing, including, it seems, the quantities of gold you are able to acquire by your skills or the gross mistakes of other parties.

So yes, I fully agree you transfer some gold to your Paris vault, but rather eight hundred thousand Galleons instead of the totality of the sum. The three remaining millions would be more wisely invested in the Mediterranean markets.”

“Is it...not risky?” she asked the brown-haired lawyer.

“What Stella proposes is not risky at all from an economic point of view. Her advice is to open a new vault at the Bardi Bank of Venetia, and as much as I want to criticise them, this establishment has a centuries-old history of true neutrality. Whatever you do outside, as long as you don’t attack one of their employees or their buildings, they will fight to the death to keep your assets safe.

No, the problem lies in the issue that the British Ministry is not going at all to enjoy your decision if you decide to move your funds there.”

“My French vault isn’t exactly favourable for British interests either,” she couldn’t help but remark.

“Yes, but for all our government loves to hate the Frenchman on the other side of the Channel, the trade between our two countries exist and has constantly increased since the Grindelwald War. On the other hand, Venice and Britain’s interests have few shared interests, and it is London which is informed to import innovations coming from Southern France and Italy, not the reverse. Overall, the gold departing the Isles rarely returns, and when it does...well, it returns with people like Stella who love tormenting the conservative members of the Wizengamot.”

“You flatter me too much,” smiled the Black Widow. “When their wives look like the result of a botched crossbreeding attempt between a pit-bull and a toad, it is too easy to give them a heart attack by inadvertence.”

Her interlocutor rolled her eyes but didn’t reply directly to her guardian.

“Like I said, the Ministry will not like this.”

“Speaking of the Ministry...I noticed there were unwilling to reopen my family vault for the moment, no?”

She had thought she would be able to open Vault 72 and see what familial possessions her parents had left her inside, but she had not so far received the official owls...

“Many sub-secretaries and assistants to the Head of Department are blocking all my moves,” replied unhappily her magical guardian. “This has not changed since my last letter. The official excuse they give is their worry about James Potter being able to use these funds while he’s a criminal at large, but honestly, I just think that with the Ministry starved of funds, they’re waiting for a pretext to seize it as soon as they can justify it.”

The Ministry employees had really a heart of gold. They were quite lucky Salazar Slytherin had not hidden a basilisk in a Ministry basement as far as she knew. She certainly wouldn’t have run to their rescue.

Fine, if they didn’t want to reopen her family vault, she saw no reason to transfer her gold, silver, and bronze coins to a location where these treacherous bureaucrats couldn’t confiscate her treasure.

“I think it’s a good idea then to send my gold to a new bank overseas. I don’t want the Ministry to try the same thing they did twelve years ago and find myself without a Sickle to my name. That said, I want to transfer a smaller sum...say fifty thousand Galleons, to Vault 869, my trust vault.”

“Very good, though I will recommend that you upgrade the security of the vault in question,” Andromeda advised her.

“Seventy hundred and fifty thousand Galleons can go to Vault 7043 at Paris and the three million at the...Bardi Bank, that’s right?”

“Yes, it is. It’s one of the last great remaining neutral financial establishments left after Grindelwald destroyed the Swiss powerhouses.”

“How the hell did he do that?” Really, Binns was a major problem. They really learned nothing in History at Hogwarts, everything had to be done in self-study. “To my best knowledge, Nazi Germany and Switzerland were never at war in the non-magical world.”

“Oh, they weren’t in our world, either,” Lady Zabini reassured her. “The Dark Lord just Imperiused a few of their top directors and pushed them to invest into what the economist calls a Ponzi scheme in 1942. By the time the ICW realised what had happened, it was too late. Most of their money reserves were gone or in Grindelwald’s hands...which, by the way, explains their great difficulties to raise any armies after that date as Europe burned.”

It certainly explained why the Swiss weren’t the masters of the banking system in the magical world, yes.

“Hmm...and there’s no risk this Bardi Bank will suffer this fate, right?”

“The thirty Great Families, including House Zabini, have made clear an attack upon the Bardi Bank is a declaration of war against them. By itself, it would not be enough to be a safeguard, but every House which chooses to open a vault there in general makes the same guarantee. And as they have prestigious clients from Russia and Eastern Europe as a whole, not to mention Egypt, Spain, and many other African leaders...let’s say no one has been willing to challenge them. It helps that their bank is also ten times more fortified than a Gringotts fortress.”

“I hope you’re right,” that said, at the speed the Ministry or Dumbledore turned against their so-called ‘supporters’, it was better to have something looking like an escape plan out of Britain. “I suppose it will help that you’ve recently given me the Venetian nationality, right?”

“It doesn’t hurt,” answered serenely Stella Zabini. “It doesn’t hurt at all. Now if we are in agreement on this...”

“I am.”

“Then we have a lot of parchment and official documents for you to sign.” Alexandra groaned. “Oh, and the Board has made a request for your Invisibility Cloak to remain out of Hogwarts for the next school years. While the majority feel you’re more responsible than some Gryffindors I will not name, they prefer not to risk a second incident of the same gravity as the one which happened after your Quidditch match.”

“I will place the Cloak in my Trust Vault, then.” Too bad, she would have dearly wanted to experiment more with it...for a reason which escaped her, it had a sliver of essence similar to the Morrigan. It was not exactly comparable to the presence she felt at the Goddess’ presence...something death-tasting and yet a bit different.

Obviously, it was a priceless asset, and that Black and all his friends of the Boy-Who-Lived court used it for their pranks was a major insult to its invisibility capacities.

“Have there been any clues where the Headmaster has hidden the Pensieve?” She demanded as her hydra hissed ferociously inside her body. Granted, the fact Dumbledore had kept the Cloak didn’t guarantee he had the Pensieve too. But in the magical or the non-magical world, the logical outcome was often the truth. Dumbledore had seized the Invisibility Cloak for his purposes, it was not an unreasonable guess to assume he had a Pensieve...though what use the Headmaster had for this one, she had no idea.

According to *Hogwarts: A History*, there was a priceless one in his office, one which may have been built shortly after the Founders’ demise, so it wasn’t like he would need it...maybe he had sold it for the influence it would grant him with a powerful family?

“Albus Dumbledore denied all knowledge of this heirloom, and since I can’t exactly search in his vaults, I’m afraid you will have to wait for the Pensieve to resurface...”

**5 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

In public, Slytherin House was the model of unity, calm, dignified behaviour, and maturity. There was no other choice, really. For more than a decade, the noble House bearing the colours of Salazar Slytherin had lived with the knowledge that the three other Houses would tear them apart if they showed the slightest weakness in front of the rest of the student body. After all, when Slytherins could be and were attacked night and day by unapologetic Gryffindors because they had been walking the wrong corridor, what would the Lions and their allies do if they didn’t present a united front? Nothing good, that was for sure.

Of course, what happened in private was far more different. People outside tended to forget, but there were a lot of Dark political parties in the Wizengamot, and though the Lords and Ladies could all be trusted to vote against a Light-supported law, that didn’t make them friends. The same was true for their Heirs and Heiresses. Just because they were all forced to tolerate each other in public, observe the basic courtesies, and attend their classes together didn’t mean they were friends, far from it.

The advantages were good: no matter what your political stance was, in front of the Gryffindors, there would be someone to have your back. The drawback, of course, was that the Slytherins loudly speaking imbecilities or making themselves ridiculous, like one Draco Malfoy before he received a furious lesson from his mother, had to be supported too.

No matter that they were idiots and behaved like perfect cretins in public. No matter that they lost on average so many House Points that Professor Snape’s donations had to be huge and unfair to maintain them in the Race for the House Cup. No matter how this behaviour contributed to antagonising Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs who could have been their allies.

And unfortunately, with the suspension of two out of three of the Golden Trio, one of these problematic students had decided it was time to voice again in the Common Room his views on the purity of blood. It was not Draco Malfoy. No, Daphne knew she would have handled the blonde idiot easily and quietly.

The loud and dangerous individual speaking was Dermot Ardoch, sixth-year Slytherin, Heir of House Ardoch, who also happened to be one of the survivors from the Slytherin Heir’s conspiracy. Daphne had thought that seeing his associates and friends getting butchered by Alexandra Potter in explosions of lightning and deadly elemental storms would have forced to him to study efficiently for his NEWTS and try to moderate his words in public.

She had been wrong, clearly. Ardoch had not learned his lesson at all.

“This proves beyond doubt the danger posed by the Muggle-born! The blood-traitors who think they can make friends with them and treat them as equals are left friendless at the first incident! What can you expect with filth whose blood is mud and dirty? They can insist every day we must treat these uncultured, ignorant sons and daughters of Muggle, all we want, but we know the truth! Our lines remain powerful! Our lines remain pure and carry the strength of ancient lines going back to Salazar Slytherin’s time! This is why I say the Dark Lord was right to strike against the crass stupidity of the Ministry and the fool Muggle-lover we have as Headmaster. This is why we must show the other Houses we stand firm against the filth which threatens our world.”

Okay, this rant had lasted long enough. To be clear, Daphne didn’t like the Muggle-born population very much. Most of them were indeed weak, ignorant and very willing to refuse to learn the traditions and culture people of her status took for granted.

But the truth was, the view held by the Junior Death Eaters had been presented already and had monumentally failed. With the two Basilisks dead, the three other Houses had spit in their faces and most secret accords had not survived May 1993. Slytherin had been on top as long as the Monster roamed the corridors, but a lot of children had not forgotten the threats and the insults. They had not forgotten...and if there was a thing Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were known for, it was not to forgive easily the wounds of the mind and heart.

“The Azkaban break-out proves the days of the Ministry are numbered and soon the Dark Lord will come back, more powerful and terrible than ever, and the new order will get rid of the vermin we are forced to tolerate inside these walls...”

“Big words,” she cut him off before the end of this uninspiring speech. Seriously, half of the boys and girls looked completely asleep, so she was doing them a favour. “I see a little flaw in your plan.”

“Greengrass, your opinion is neither wanted nor...”

“I have a warning to deliver to you,” the blonde-haired Slytherin affirmed, trying to stay cold as the Ardoch heir sent her a glare of pure loathing promising eternal torment. “Your little talks on blood-purity have not been ignored by the other Houses. A certain person has grown incredibly concerned by your political agenda and urges you to desist. Otherwise...well, in her own words, ‘there will be consequences’.”

“I don’t fear her, Greengrass!” For an instant, Daphne was really scared, as Dermot Ardoch used his wand to project dark sparks and his visage was that of a demented man. “You think the Exiled Queen scares me? I’ve fought her and I could have killed her if I truly wanted her death! I don’t fear her! And next time she wants to talk to me, tell her not to use a mouthpiece! If she is so strong, let her deliver her threats to my face!”

“You’re completely mad.” To Daphne’s great surprise, this affirmation had come out from the mouth of Annabeth Blackford, another survivor of the Slytherin Conspiracy. “Lewis, Jared, and Oliver fought and died against her, and then she decided to massacre two Basilisks for the fun of it! And you want to take her alone?”

“She had the effect of surprise, and we underestimated her! This will not happen again! There will never be another Chamber of Secrets!”

Indeed, there wouldn’t be. Daphne was going to send a message to Susan in the next hour or so, but she had a feeling it was going to be too late. Potter was not Dumbledore...Dermot Ardoch had just signed his death warrant.

**6 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It may seem strange when talking about a Ravenclaw, but Lyre had long noticed Alexandra was rarely using the same seats in the library. After several months, the young Slytherin witch had started to theorise the reason lied in the many, many topics interesting the Basilisk-Slayer of Ravenclaw.

Unlike Hermione, who could read row after row of transfiguration books, Alexandra had never manifested the deep desire to analyse book after book from first to last page on obscure details best reserved for high-level essays. No, the search for knowledge of their friend and leader was far more dispersed and covered hundreds of subjects. The Potter Heiress could read six out of seven days per week history books, and then without warning study magical creatures, illusion charms, or traditions of a foreign civilisation.

This was why it was anything but a surprise to find her in the section of Norse culture, surrounded by a voluminous pile of books.

“Interesting read?” she asked in a low tone. Most of the library was near empty at this hour, and there was no one in the four or five closest sections, but it never failed to be prudent.

“Oh yes,” said the green-eyed girl, barely raising her head to give her a nod. “Bloodthirsty culture, the Norse, but their Runes – and their creation process I suppose – are really fascinating...”

Lyre raised an eyebrow to mark her disapproval. The Norse culture had arrived at the apex of its civilisation by carving their stones and drenching them in enemies’ blood and stealing the fury of their blizzards. It was the approach of brute force...strength for the sake of strength, magic for the sake of dominating magic users.

It was the very philosophy which had led to the rise of Durmstrang, and one in her opinion which was best stayed away from.

“I hope you’re not going to step onto that path.” She received a grimace in return.

“Don’t worry, I really don’t fancy going to Scandinavia and killing everything coming my way until I have enough blood to fill a cauldron and launch a very illegal ritual.” Alexandra’s lip contorted in disapproval. “Seriously, a lot of things in Norse culture are horrible and disgusting. The Ministry freaks out on these shores every time someone celebrate the Old Ways, but when you read this and you realise there’s another culture on the other side of the North Sea which several decades ago drank their wine in the skulls of their victims...”

“Don’t forget the moments when they manifested their refusal of the Statute by bringing...things...into this reality and wiping out several villages.”

“That wasn’t mentioned in the two books I read,” commented her friend. “Perhaps it’s in the Forbidden Section...not that it surprises me, you understand. The books printed with several dozen disapprovals’ manifestations towards one of the Ministry’s most fundamental laws aren’t exactly welcome in this library.”

“Dumbledore’s meddling, no doubt.”

“In this case, I think it started long before him,” Alexandra opened before her another book...and there was a painting of what looked to be a Hogwarts student struggling to subdue a dragon or one of its cousin species. “This representation was done in the fourteenth century at Durmstrang for the Tri-Wizard Tournament which took place there.”

There was no need to wonder what had caused the animosity between the two schools, then.

“I suppose it was one of the events where most of the Champions never came back after one Trial?”

“What could possibly give it away?” Alexandra smirked. “Durmstrang seemed to have won this one handily, apparently. I will have to find the Tri-Wizard archives, frankly. It was bloody, but it looked like there were plenty of scandals...”

“Aren’t there always?” Lyre asked rhetorically, before Alexandra highlighted a paragraph with a quick Lumos. “The Hogwarts Champion won the Second Task while dead drunk? You’re right, the archives of this Tournament are sure to be interesting...”

Lyre watched silently as Alexandra flipped through a different book. It was a pity that this Tournament stank like a dead fish, because in all honestly, Lyre couldn’t see anyone at Hogwarts with more chances than Alexandra to win the competition. There was no one in Slytherin for sure more skilled or more powerful than her. And this brought her to the little internal problem they had...

“Lady Zabini gave me some ‘special’ information concerning my ‘pet’ problem, you know. It looks like the mental defences provided by an Animagus form are far less powerful than you implied.”

“Well, my book isn’t at the cutting-edge of magical theory and was written by the friend of one of the Bayard-De Lain method inventors.” Lyre replied defensively. “How much ‘less powerful’ are we speaking about?”

“Well, apparently the predatory animals have a bigger territorial instinct and can provide good protection against the average Legilimens. But the biggest share of the defence comes when you merge totally with your animal, because this way, your mind begins to think and speak like an animal.”

Lyre thought about what it implied...and grimaced.

“Any hostile Parselmouth who is also a powerful Legilimens could possibly read your thoughts.”

“Yes, and this is why I’m not exactly happy. Of course, the ‘pet’ is extremely big, predatory, and dangerous, but there is simply no way to know how complete the mental protection at the end of this will be.”

Alexandra closed the last book with snap and levitated them all at the same time towards the shelves.

“I suppose you have bad news regarding Slytherin House, otherwise you would have waited until this evening.”

“Dermot Ardoch is uncontrollable. Yesterday, Daphne tried to put him back in his place, but he declared to her face that if you wanted to say something to him, you’d better say it to him face-to-face. Oh, and he ranted for nearly an hour about his pure-blood ideas. How we must rise to crush the Muggle-born and all of that.”

Alexandra’s expression grew sombre, and if Lyre slightly shivered, it was not due to the temperature in the library. The Male-Foi Heiress cursed the idiot calling himself Dermot Ardoch. Yes, most of her family in France believed in blood-purity and for good reasons. After all, it was widely documented that the union of magical lines led to the birth of a lot of powerful wizards, increasing familial magical talents and creation of lore which would have never been possible otherwise. But the British bigots had pushed it to the extreme and the ridiculous. Some were practising incest, by Joan’s Light! And even those who didn’t suffer from the ravages of inbreeding were convinced being a pure-blood naturally gave you an advantage...which was as much of a death sentence as it sounded against Alexandra Potter.

“I gave him a chance. He squandered it away.” Alexandra’s smile got incredibly dangerous and Lyre for once thought the Animagus form of her friend was in fact incredibly appropriate. “His mistake.”

Her tone strongly affirmed this was going to be his *final* mistake.

“I will remind you we can’t kill him. As the Ardoch Heir, the blood wards of the Ministry and Gringotts will sound the alert the moment he dies.”

Alexandra snickered.

“I told Daphne and Susan when we...mentioned the Ardoch problem in passing that I wouldn’t kill him. I intend to keep my word on this one.”

Well, at least the Badger was a positive influence...she had a bet going on with Nigel and Morag on the exact date Alexandra was going to invite her girlfriend into the Exiled and so far her predictions were closer than the others...

“No, for this one, we are going to deal with the Junior Death Eater with...what is the French word for this? Ah, yes! We are going to deal with him with *finesse*. I entertained the idea of sending him to Siberia, but the idiot wouldn’t survive ten hours unless he somehow meets a wizard in the middle of the Russian steppes.”

“And your solution instead is?”

“We are going to offer him a sunny holiday...a very long and magic-less holiday on a sunny island. Tell me, have you ever heard of the Galapagos Islands?”

**6 October 1993, somewhere near Hogwarts, Scotland**

The amount of cold water thrown in his face instantly brought him back to full awareness.

Dermot tried to move, but unfortunately he was tied and bound. He couldn’t move a finger as he felt wet, cold, and hurt. As a result, he had to settle for glaring at the smiling girl he could see playing with her wand in front of him.

“Potter! Release me, your daughter of a whore!”

“Language, Ardoch, language,” admonished him the Ravenclaw. “You are supposed to be a scion of an ancient and distinguished pure-blood line, no? Aristocrats must present a dignified and polite image to the world.”

“FUCK YOU!”

“Like you would even be considered by a nice witch to be a potential love interest,” said derisively the Potter bitch before punching him directly in the nose and his world exploded in pain.

When he was able to see correctly and the bells of pain had stopped ringing in his head, Dermot realised he was no longer in the castle. They were close to the Forbidden Forest, and the railway of the Hogwarts Express was not far, but he couldn’t see Hogwarts. Merlin and Morgana, he couldn’t see Hogsmeade either.

“I don’t know which secret passage you took to get me out of the castle, but the Professors are going to be warned in a few minutes and...”

“Oh, shut up Ardoch,” said Potter in a bored tone. “Nobody is coming to save you. I know Dumbledore monitors the secret passages, even those he isn’t supposed to know about. He also controls the Portkeys, Apparition, and Floo authorisations as long as we remain inside the school. But since I broke my broom in the last Quidditch game, I received my Head of House’s signed authorisation to test my new Nimbus 2000 this evening in presence of half a dozen reliable witnesses.”

Dermot turned his head as far as he could on the right, and indeed like the Ravenclaw had said there was a new broom.

“That doesn’t change anything, the moment you kill me...”

“Ardoch, shut up,” and this time a ray of yellow hit him and his mouth was no longer answering to him, his tongue was stuck and he felt something awful-tasting in his throat. “I bought a new two hundred Galleons-worth broom in order to forge myself an alibi this evening, and I had to commission an untraceable Portkey from my associates for the small price of twenty-five Galleons. Do you really believe me so stupid to have not envisaged what your death would do to my plans?”

Ardoch shivered internally because there was nothing he could do and there was absolutely no trace of mercy or compassion in those Killing Curse-coloured eyes.

“The Portkey is going to activate in exactly four minutes. I just wanted to see for myself if there was the tiniest chance of redemption for you. Guess there isn’t.”

The Ardoch Heir shook his head, trying to see where his wand was, but there was no sign of it...and he couldn’t help but notice that his left hand was manacled to a sort of long metal chain and an old-looking gold fork. He was ready to bet it was the Portkey in question.

“The moment you continued to affirm that you wanted to continue your bigoted crusade, you sealed your fate. I don’t forget crimes like rape and murder, blood-twit.” Then Potter began to speak in another language, one he didn’t understand a single word of...and three runes were carved on his wand arm – the origin of the pain he had first felt, began to shine with a deep red light. A second later, everything from the runes on his forearm to his hand disappeared in a blood mist.

The pain increased until it became nearly unbearable, and Dermot wanted to scream...but the hex which had silenced him was still active.

“Well, it works. Thank you, Heir Ardoch, for being my first test subject in the wonderful field of Egyptian Hieroglyphs.”

Green eyes stared at him and in the depths, for an instant, the Slytherin sixth-year thought he saw a gigantic predator observe him.

“I rarely give second chances, so you will understand if I’m a bit angry you didn’t seize the opportunity to redeem yourself. But since the Headmaster or Snape isn’t willing to clean House Slytherin, I guess it’s my duty to get rid of the Death Eaters in-training. Without your wand and your wand arm, your magical potential is seriously crippled. The Portkey will send you to islands where there isn’t any Wizarding community, I checked. And because I don’t want the slightest chance of being arrested for your disappearance...”

The wand was raised and pointed right between his eyes.

“OBLIVIATE!”

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*This is the moment, dear readers, I make my return in this story. Caught in a dastardly plot of the Exchequer, I was captured by the Dark Wizards and sent to one of their secret prisons. Needless to say, escaping the place was going to prove somewhat difficult...*

Extract from *The Rise of Darkness*, Chapter 10, by Gilderoy Lockhart.

**7 October 1993, sixty kilometres south of the Galapagos Islands**

It stood to reason a dark organisation bent on conquering the world had an infamous prison. Grindelwald had Nurmengard, after all, and plenty of Dark Lords who had preceded him had not been reluctant to build lesser fortresses of doom and despair.

Obviously, Dark Lords created thousands of enemies by their very actions. You needed some place secure to imprison and torture them. When your reign was soaked in blood and constantly reinforced by the lax application of massacres and sheer terror, there was urgent need for a prison to make sure all your pesky political opponents never saw the light of day again.

Gilderoy Lockhart sighed.

If only the Exchequer followed this theory, things would be far simpler. Infinitely more painful and disagreeable for him personally, no doubt about it, but vastly simpler.

The prison of the Exchequer did not include a black fortress, Dementors, a legion of Dark Creatures, and screams of agony heard thousands of kilometres away.

No, their ‘prison’ was surrounded by azure waters, they had a beach of white-yellow sand, and the little houses they slept in at night were like what inhabitants of paradise islands built themselves to live tranquil lives away from civilisation.

It was still a prison, of course, and a well-guarded one at that. The Exchequer, while not overly cruel, had clearly no intentions of letting them escape. The wards they were surrounded with made the Hogwarts ones look like amateur work. There was a fortified watchtower at the centre of the island and ten battle-hardened wizards and witches supported by about fifty were-cobras ready to intervene in less than a minute. Portkeys, Apparition, and flying brooms or carpets stopped working kilometres away, and possibly more. The wizards who were their wardens had obviously taken their wands or anything which could serve as a secondary or a tertiary magical focus. The days after they arrived, they were dosed with Veritaserum and subjected to several mental probes insuring they spilled all their secrets and plans to avoid captivity. In less than a month, everyone revealed everything he or she knew. The mages they were opposed to were far too powerful.

Besides, like his capture in the streets of London had proven, they had a way to neutralise all his Portkeys and enchanted protective items without directly casting a spell at them.

Yes, it was good the living conditions were enjoyable, because frankly he didn’t see any way to escape by his own means.

Some had tried swimming away. Some had tried to pretend they liked to surf on the waves and pushed their support as far as they could away from their prison. According to the old wizards and witches who had been there for decades, the result was bloody.

The Exchequer was not preventing anyone from swimming; this would have been a ridiculous command when one was tempted with one glance at the purity of the azure sea under the shining sun. But there were buoys close to the beach to warn you not to stray too far. The Dark Wizards had somehow magically bred a sort of prehistoric shark and these monsters were patrolling in the waters where the outer wards were active.

Last but not least, nobody knew where the island was. ‘Somewhere in the Pacific’ was anyone’s best guess, but given the sum of enchantments, weather manipulation and everything magic had altered, for all they knew they could be in the Atlantic or the Indian Ocean.

Everything the prisoners had been able to think of – those who still thought of escaping at least – was prevented by a war, a spell or an esoteric skill. In Gilderoy’s opinion, it was a very worrying thing for these flawless measures were not, could not, be thought of and implemented in mere days. Like in a lot of things, the Exchequer had worked for the long game and now they had a prison which was honestly the closest thing there was to the definition of unassailable.

In a normal prison where inmates were authorised to spend their days as they wished, there still would have been the prospect, as unlikely as it sounded, to unite the prisoners and defeat in detail the Exchequer and their reptile associates.

Here, it was best not to think too much of it. First, the wardens had made clear they could leave at any moment...leaving them starving on a deserted island if there was the remotest chance of an uprising succeeding.

Secondly, the prisoners had all in common the fact they were witches, wizards or beings they wanted out of circulation in the real world. Nine out of ten opposed the Exchequer. This wasn’t the same thing as to say they were people you wanted to sympathise with.

Gilderoy, in his quality of spies, had heard plenty of rumours about the Light organisations known as the Army of Light and the Trinity. A lot of it he had believed to be merely idle gossip and vague things to scare children. Like the Exchequer, really. The Army of Light was supposed to be the successors of the Knights of the Round Table, selected by Merlin himself to continue the eternal fight against the darkness. The Trinity was a cult-like organisation venerating Ra, the God of Light.

The four wizards and the two witches present on this island and sharing their fate as prisoners proved the rumours weren’t that weird in the first place. And no, he had not tried to make friends with them. He could recognise fanatics when he saw them, and those were the only prisoners who had magical restraints on their arms, legs, and neck, along with a were-cobra soldier following them everywhere.

The wardens had explained calmly it was not so much for the security of the prison owners as it was for the prisoners themselves, and judging by the looks these Light-affiliated men and women sent everyone at dinner, Lockhart could very well believe it.

“Ah Heinrich, have you seen your young were-rat companion since lunch? I’m afraid I can’t find him anywhere...”

“The wardens wanted to see him,” replied the older German curse-breaker. “By the sound of it, his cousin has done something which has ruffled their feathers...”

Gilderoy Lockhart grimaced and he was not the only one in their little group. Alexandra Potter was a mystery and looked to have lived through far more interesting adventures than he would have bet in his wildest dreams before going to Hogwarts. But the Exchequer were not the Death Eaters, and against these Dark Wizards there was only so many times you could dance along the precipice before falling...

**7 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Few people were aware of this, but in 1960 Albus had been given a small island in the Caribbean as a reward for the one-sided victory he had led against an alliance of six brutish houngans threatening world peace.

For the first time in decades, the Chief Warlock was wondering if it wouldn’t be nice to spend Christmas there. The house was maintained by a couple of House Elves really, and with a small preparation warning he was sure it would be pleasant to take quite a few days away from any pressing responsibilities.

Merlin’s beard, he needed a rest.

But deep inside, he knew he wasn’t going to get one. There were too many disasters he had to solve, too many years of political influence at risk, and too many millions of Galleons at stake. He had even been forced to hire ten more young assistants from reliable Light families, and this was for the administrative duties.

There were problems everywhere, and he had been forced to do more damage control this year than in the last two decades. The most pressing issue had been Bellatrix’s so-called ‘innocence’ judgement rendered by the ICW. Officially, Britain had accepted the terms. Unofficially, there was no way the Ministry was going to give this Death Eater the possessions they had confiscated back. Lestrange Manor had been razed and several new properties had been bought on the lands they had lost, many belonging to his allies. The Ministry had not the authority to buy it back from their legitimate owners, and even if they had, there was no money for it. For that matter, the money and the other possessions the Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix had seized at the end of the war could not be returned. These assets had long been divided as part of an accord between him, Crouch, and Bagnold, and once again the Ministry could not repay hundreds of thousands Galleons. Maybe in a couple of years when they had stopped paying for the World Cup, but then the issue would be buried in any case.

As a result, he had been forced to activate an obscure law and several other traditions to in effect help Fudge. The Minister had declared Bellatrix Black was entitled to nothing from the Ministry or any organisation which had seized the possessions of House Lestrange during the war.

There would be a lawyer battle, of that he had no doubt, but it would be one he would win. Too many wizards and witches were at risk to lose something in this affair for any other outcome to be possible.

The problem was that the Bellatrix affair, made incredibly damaging politically by the fact Crouch had tried to bury her name under the weight of unsolved crimes, was just the biggest and thorniest issue in a political war zone where the sharks were coming from every direction.

The stupidity of the Black Heir and the youngest Weasley boy unleashed more disorder day after day. Not only did he have to make sure his block stayed united, but the concessions he had to make would have been unthinkable one year ago and there were more lawsuits coming. Despite his demand that the incident stay secret, knowledge had somehow arrived to the ears of Rita Skeeter and her fellow amoral journalists.

The aftermath was...ugly. Many Houses which had seen their heirlooms disappear during the war were now striking the drums at his gates, sending Howlers and demanding the return of objects he pertinently knew he didn’t have.

There were other parents who didn’t care about an Invisibility Cloak, priceless artefact or not, but who shouted higher than their counterparts because they felt many heads should roll and the perpetrators of the attack against House Ravenclaw had to be expelled and their wands broken on the spot.

By this point he was ready to admit the loss of four million Galleons was no big loss. Wealth could be recovered, especially when he had no rival in Alchemy on British soil and few challengers in Europe. A lot of the Alchemical components he had made before 1945 were safely stored in his personal vaults and with his associates he controlled the market prices. The influence, the titles, and the advantages he was losing were much more damaging. Granted the Dark wasn’t really profiting from this debacle, as they were still feeling the effects of the Chambers’ opening and the Azkaban break-out, but there were other political parties profiting from these issues, namely the Grey and the Grey-Dark. Despite his best efforts, it was quite likely he was going to be forced to vacate the seat of Grand Sorcerer before next June. It was not pleasant news, as this position controlled whether newly invented spells and enchanted items were acceptable or not for the use of common wizards and witches.

As classes were finally going to resume, he had been forced to make more contingencies to prevent the worst from happening, the revealing of Bagnold and Crouch’s failures. First had been of course the safeguards to ensure James Potter never tried the same stunt as his fellow Death Eater. The Headmaster didn’t know why the former Gryffindor hadn’t stormed the ICW Justice Court and tried to claim his innocence in the hours after Bellatrix Black left free and ‘innocent’, but by Merlin he wasn’t going to give him the chance. The moment James Potter tried to enter the ICW buildings, he would have a tragic accident – no make that a lot of tragic accidents.

More instructions had been given to his Wizengamot members to delay critical investigations until the Aurors lost their patience and returned to more productive uses of their time. The Black Widow would be permanently kept under watch and arrested at the first opportunity. He had also begun to build a task force to storm Malfoy Manor at the first occasion, for he was sure Bellatrix was hosted by her younger sister since she had no manor or house to her name. A new Head of Gryffindor would be nominated by the end of the year, to relieve Minerva from part of her heavy administrative duties and double the monitoring of Gryffindor House, now that the Lions had proven they couldn’t be trusted to do something so simple as to not murder anyone accidentally.

The wards of his office flashed to inform him someone had given the correct password to his gargoyle, and footsteps were heard climbing the stairs. Albus Dumbledore gave a last glare to the mountain of messages, demands, and various catastrophes he now received constantly in the last days before presenting his best smile and casting a few animation Charms in order to clean his desk.

To his relief, it was not the imbecile serving as Minister. He had seen Fudge far too often for his taste, and the man had often no idea how to do his job, but that didn’t prevent him from running around and accusing everyone he met of not doing theirs. A minor consequence of people beginning to whisper that there were, perhaps, better candidates to replace him in the short and long term.

No, for now the visitor was his Head of Slytherin. Alas, the expression of Severus Snape, never the most engaging visage of Britain, looked carved in granite. And his first words were not of any nature to bring joy and happiness.

“Dermot Ardoch remains impossible to find,” declared bluntly the dark-clothed man. “Filius, Septima, and I have completed our searches with all the Prefects we could gather. He’s nowhere to be found.”

It took half of his Legilimency abilities, great mental strength, and a good deal of experience to not burn half of the papers and the books in his office. Morgana’s damned soul, wasn’t there a limit to how quickly disasters could strike one after another?

“I suppose everything including the secret passages, the outer perimeter, and the centaurs of the Forbidden Forest was explored.”

“It was.”

Damn it. He didn’t care for the sixth-year Slytherin at all, House Ardoch was firmly stuck to Malfoy’s arse and he had estimated there was about an eighty percent chance young Dermot had been involved in one way or another in the Battle for the Chamber of Secrets. Besides, given some of his family’s lawyer activities during last spring, it was likely the teenager was going to end up in Azkaban before he was twenty.

But he was an Heir of a Noble and Ancient House, and as a Hogwarts student, his security was his responsibility. This meant more problems on the horizon. And this cursed month of October wasn’t half-over.

“Has Filius checked the blood wards available to us?” If the boy was dead, it would at least provide some suspects and allow him to involve Moody and a few retired Aurors on the case...

“He did. Ardoch is still alive and while there was an alert he was injured and his blood was shed, his life does not appear to be threatened. However, some of Filius’ unspeakable contacts have managed to confirm Dermot Ardoch isn’t anywhere near the British Isles.”

That was...inconvenient. After all, while kidnapping was the more probable reason for this disappearance, the total absence of evidence during the hours the boy supposedly disappeared was preventing any certain scenario to be formulated.

“Have you any clue about who might be behind Dermot Ardoch’s disappearance?”

“I have,” grimly affirmed Severus. “Though most of it consists of tiny pieces of conversation pieced together to serve as evidence and even Rita Skeeter would not manage to sell it to her gullible readers.”

Having read the mass of idiocies the woman sprouted in each of her articles, that was really saying something.

“Any clues are better than none,” the Chief Warlock said while opening his hands to show how they had nothing on the Slytherin’s vanishing act.

“Very well. I have three suspect factions which might have acted to remove Dermot Ardoch from Hogwarts. By increasing order of likelihood, the first are the goblins.”

The goblins? Why in the name of Merlin would goblins be interested in...oh no, surely the boy wasn’t *that* stupid...

“He tried to take a loan with them, didn’t he?”

Severus’ dark glare showed he wasn’t exactly impressed with the wits of his student too.

“He took out a loan this summer, there is no doubt of it. I found the official parchment searching his trunk.” The Head of Slytherin slammed his fist against his desk in a fit of temper. “What, by the spirits of the Founders, was he trying to achieve? Your father threatening to cut you out of your trust vault was no reason to go to those bloody halberd-bankers!”

Albus had to recognise he couldn’t have better said it himself. The nasty little beasts controlling Gringotts were already tough to deal with for normal affairs, but when it was the question of a loan...

There were bad manners to die for in this world. Few were more horrible than the ones goblins gave to the people who refused to repay their money in time and hour.

“How many Galleons are we speaking about?”

“Close to fifty thousand.” Yes, the goblins were definitely willing and capable to murder a wizard from this sum. “The big obstacle against their involvement however is that no goblin was in Scotland for the last two months and if they had tried somehow to infiltrate Hogwarts, there would have been a battle, Ardoch would not have come quietly, and he would have certainly not let himself taken alive.”

He’d better have not. There were few worse fates than being slowly cooked in a goblin’s cauldron before the Gringotts torturers slowly turned your insides in precious metals.

“The second suspects are most likely the other Slytherins,” Severus continued with a dark sneer. As he sent his Head of Slytherin a reproachful look, the Potions Professor defended himself. “I tried to keep a lid on the whole mess, Headmaster, but I can’t be in my classroom teaching and watching over the other eighty-plus students of my House! Moreover, the issue is not from the Death Eaters’ families this time. The problem comes from several students tired of the enmity they face day after day because our unity’s policies forced them to side with blood-purists and killers-in-training. There’s a rising minority which finds itself disgusted by the philosophy championed by the Dark Lord. Furthermore, Dermot Ardoch made himself plenty of enemies in the last three years, so it is entirely possible a Slytherin jumped at the chance to remove him from the board now that he was becoming a vocal and walking embarrassment. Afterwards, House Slytherin as a whole helped them cover the deed. So if it happened like that, the whole House is implicated and no one will open his or her mouth to me or any Professor. They have chosen their side in this affair.”

It was not what he wanted to hear, though so many students refusing to follow under Tom’s banners was certainly promising.

“And the third?”

“The third is...complicated.” Albus Dumbledore was surprised to see Severus preferred to look at the portraits of past Headmasters rather than him. “The Greengrass Heiress made several accusations against Dermot Ardoch for several days before his disappearance. The gist of their content was that he was advised to stop his diatribes against the blood-traitors, the Muggle-born, and those he found ‘unworthy’, otherwise there would be consequences.”

For the political agenda, he approved. For the violence the daughter of Lord Greengrass promised, Albus found himself appalled. There were other ways to punish a recalcitrant student, and it was not by playing vigilante when the teachers were away that the problems would be solved!

“I will have to summon the Greengrass Heiress to my office, then. She must learn it is not...”

“I’m sorry, Headmaster, perhaps I was not clear enough. Daphne Greengrass was just the messenger for the Exiled Queen in this instance.”

“I’m afraid I am not familiar with this title,” the Chief Warlock said with a veneer of amusement. Honestly, the young generation was really overestimating its own skills...

“It is the nickname the Hogwarts rumour mill has given to Alexandra Potter, though my Slytherin tend to call her the Basilisk-Slayer or the Snake-Butcher when she isn’t around.”

It took everything he had not to take his wand and begin casting Blasting Curses. He couldn’t even maintain the pretence of a smile. Of course James Potter’s spawn was behind this latest problem! For a second or two, he wondered if the Ravenclaw witch had agreed with Bellatrix Black to form an alliance in order to make his life impossible before banishing the idea from his mind. No, the sister of Narcissa Malfoy was still a pure-blood supremacist, no matter how much distance she wanted to put between the Death Eaters and herself. These threats weakened considerably Houses which had sworn their lot to the banners of House Malfoy and their allies. The psychopathic Death Eater and the girl who loved to bloody her hands in the remains of Slytherin’s students had incompatible goals. It was merely a coincidence they were striking at the same time...

“I suppose there’s no way your students will be willing to testify about these threats?”

The disbelieved expression Severus gave him was not one the Defeater of Grindelwald was used to. The Potions Master was looking at him like he had failed to produce an average result for a first-year test.

“Headmaster, several Slytherins are willing to distance themselves from the Dark Lord’s pure-blood ideology, but this doesn’t imply they want to join your side! In fact, the recent incidents have managed to decrease your popularity inside the Snake’s Den, something I didn’t believe was possible!”

Albus winced after listening to this blunt and unpleasant truth. Unfortunately, it was not a topic where he could prove his Head of Slytherin wrong. Nor could he really change the way many of them saw him as their parents had done their best to present him as a demonic figure willing to do anything to burn their Dark traditions. No, it was out of the question to endanger several decades of progressive and necessary reforms for the sake of a few malcontents he wasn’t sure he could redeem anymore.

“Let’s go back to the problem of Mr. Dermot Ardoch if there isn’t any evidence available. Have there been any rumours where our anonymous kidnappers could have sent him?”

“Rumours, there are plenty of, Headmaster, but it begins with outrageous things like New Spain and it continues with Siberia and Japan...”

**8 October 1993, Paris, France**

“You will be pleased to learn that the Ministry has decided the security of Malfoy Manor is one of their newest priorities, Bella,” commented Narcissa Malfoy while sipping her tea. “To date, we have three Aurors, three Hit-Wizards, and sixteen low-level DMLE enforcers accompanied by six or seven wands-for-hire and a battalion of forest trolls less than three miles away from the front gates of our home. Not to mention the six members of the Order of Phoenix and the ten more spies we are supposed to ignore the presence of in the nearby woods despite the fact they use Apparition, Portkey and even a bloody Phoenix to arrive and leave.”

“Well,” replied Bellatrix, “from what I remember, Fudge wouldn’t recognise a subtle move if it struck him right between the legs and Dumbledore always loved his grand entrances during the war. I never knew if it was to boost his ego or propagate his reputation as the ‘Leader of the Light’, but most of the time you had only to watch out for the fireworks to know he arrived.”

The former lieutenant of Voldemort emptied her cup of tea in a far less dignified manner than her youngest sister.

“And thank Circe and Morgana he loved to show-off,” Bellatrix added after a couple of heartbeats. “The old Muggle-lover has accumulated more magical knowledge and skills in a hundred years than half of the population in Britain.”

“He also restricted all the topics he didn’t find to his taste,” said the Lady Malfoy. “His influence and the positions of power he was granted allowed him to hold the country in his grasp, and in a way the war only solidified his control over our government and the minds of the population.”

“Indeed,” Bellatrix said looking at the window of the café they were seated in. “I realise it now we fought the wrong kind of conflict, Cissy. Even if we had taken the Ministry, it would have not been a victory. Dumbledore would have continued the fight from Hogwarts, and with a third of the population fleeing the Isles, Britain would have over night become one of those pariah magical nations where foreign task forces can do what they want since the local government is unable to stop them. We were led by a madman, and only the fact that the Dark Mark altered our minds stopped us from noticing the fact that we were destroying everything we held dear.”

The Lady of House Malfoy raised her head to watch the grey sky before engaging a subject which had always been taboo in private society.

“What is the Dark Mark?”

“The Dark Mark is a slave brand, Cissy. Although the Dark Lord modified it extensively from the old Roman archives he pillaged, it remains the founding principle of the Mark. While there are thirteen layers of magical construction imbedded in the thing, absolute obedience is the key which feeds everything else.”

Seeing that her sister had been forced to do more than her share of dirty and abominable things for what their generation believed to be the ‘Cause’, there was no wonder the tone of her sister was filled with bitterness.

“The first layer of magic made us feed him our magic, for the Dark Lord must never die,” Narcissa sent an alarmed look and Bellatrix laughed but it was a laugh cold and without joy. “Oh yes, he had forgotten to inform us of that point, hadn’t he? If the many, many soul-based rituals he had accomplished to pursue immortality didn’t work, the Dark Lord would first siphon our magic and every last drop of life in our bodies to save his precious skin. We would not survive, of course, but he would get another chance to regain his strength and ability to walk among the living.”

“How many times did he lie to us?” Granted she had never believed a Dark Lord was a gentle being, but some of the things she was now aware of made Grindelwald’s actions sane and perfectly rational.

“Too many times, Cissy, too many,” Bella huffed before continuing her tirade. “The second layer forces everyone with a sliver of loyalty to him to Apparate to his side. The third layer pushes the Marked to feel something they believe to be loyalty to him. The fourth layer allows him to locate the Dark Mark even if he is standing thousands of miles away so there is no escape. The fifth layer increases the violent tendencies of the person who was Marked and if given enough time, can make you completely insane when you combine it with Dementor exposure. I was quite lucky to have my Mark removed before I was arrested...”

“I suppose this is why you killed the others and used their forces to make an improvised blood ritual,” she guessed.

“I needed strength to escape Azkaban,” shrugged Bella, “and the trained killers were too far gone to be useful for the future plans I had in mind.”

Both drank their tea without any more talk, and it was only when the waiter was sent away with thanks and a generous tip that the two Black sisters resumed their conversation.

“How long do you intend to wait before moving against our dear ‘Lord Black’, Bella?”

“Oh a few months, I think, Cissy. No need to attack too fast, we need a lot of preparations and separate the allies from the ones who are...unsuitable.” The black-haired woman looked at the creamy decoration of the café before delivering one of the smirks that were almost a Black prerogative. “We will let him run around with his backside on fire for a few more months before ruining him in 1994. After all, his sympathy capital is now non-existent and day after day, the mockery he called a House is collapsing. His son is suspended from Hogwarts, his shares in Zonko’s are not worth the paper they’re printed on, and his reputation is one of a dead fish.”

“Some might think that is enough for revenge,” Narcissa affirmed neutrally. “Especially as you murdered his wife and spread her entrails all over his home.”

“Some people,” said Bellatrix with her eyes flashing like a black storm, “were not the subject of a ‘vicious prank’ by Sirius Black and his two partners-in-crime Remus Lupin and James Potter. Thanks to those Gryffindors cowards, I lost the child I was carrying and their ‘prank-Potion’ made me sterile! The Exchequer has made clear there are solutions to my problem, but unless I’m willing to trade one master for another, I will never have children to raise and care for as my own!”

The last words were more snarled than spoken. It took several seconds for Bellatrix to calm herself. And when she opened her mouth again, the fury was still present, barely under control.

“I can’t touch James Potter, Lilian made this very clear a decade ago before her Professor removed my Mark. James Potter is hers to kill or to spare. Besides, he spent over a decade in Azkaban and he had not my Occlumency skills, just his Animagus mental defences, so every torture I can imagine for him will look tame after he lost his family and his liberty. But the two other Lions are mine. I am going to make sure they lose everything, and that includes their homes, their gold, their friends, their titles, and their privileges...

When I have finished with my dear cousin, he will be such a pariah people will thank me for purging him from British society! Only then will I skin him and feed his soul to the Dementors!”

Personally, Narcissa Malfoy was a bit more suspicious of the chance of her eldest sister achieving that...but ruining Sirius Black, her least favourite cousin, was definitely an acceptable goal.

“Now that you’ve lightened your heart...where do you want to begin?”

**Author’s note**: the first part of this tumultuous October 1993 is now written. Of course, it is far from the last chapter I will write on this period...Halloween is not far away, and we all know there are traditions to maintain for this date...

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