**Chapter 52**

**The Burden of Electives**

**2 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

After the bloodbath of the Chamber of Secrets, the pure-blood cause had made itself very discreet. The Slytherins and their arrogance had lost a lot of credibility and until June they had return to their classes with the knowledge a half-blood had shattered their illusions.

Apparently, one summer was enough for some minds to forget the good habits created by fear and self-preservation.

Alexandra and Morag had made a detour by the Owlery this morning to inform respectively guardian and parents of the incident on the Hogwarts Express, so when they entered in the Great Hall, dozens of students were already there taking their breakfasts and chatting with their friends. But most of the animation today was provided at the Slytherin table.

You had three tries to guess who was behaving like an imbecile and the first two didn’t count.

“Hey Longbottom: The Dementors are coming, Longbottom! Wooooo!”

Crabbe and Goyle were doing bad parodies of the demons and Parkinson was doing a spectacle of herself with false imitations of fainting. And yes, at the heart of the attention was none other than Draco Malfoy.

“What is this entire mess about?” Alexandra asked to Hermione as they took their seats and began to pile drinks and food in their plates and glasses.

But Hermione had her eyes fixed on one of her books and it was Padma Patil on her left who replied.

“According to my sister, Neville Longbottom fainted aboard the Hogwarts Express yesterday when the Dementors visited his compartment. The creature behaved very aggressively and Professor Rincewind had to intervene with an insanely powerful fire spell to repulse the Dementor. But Longbottom’s collapse was very public, and Malfoy has decided to spread the news and mock it as much as he can get away with it.”

Alexandra turned her head to watch the Slytherin table before returning to her pancakes.

“This is awfully short-sighted from the blonde-haired bigot,” the Potter witch remarked with more than a hint of distaste in her voice. “Dementors are no laughing matter, and unless he’s hiding his game well, I doubt Malfoy was able to force the Dementors to leave him alone.”

Though it was surprising Neville Longbottom who had fainted. Call him a lot of things, but the Boy-Who-Lived wasn’t a coward, unlike Draco and consorts. Okay, like Alexandra he had probably a lot of things he wouldn’t want to remember from his childhood, but the Potter Heiress had less than pleasant memories too and she hadn’t fallen. Something to investigate later, certainly.

“What can you expect from this arrogant little shit?” demanded rhetorically Roger Davies, Prefect and Captain of the Ravenclaw Quidditch Team, as he delivered the year schedules. “Several Badgers told me he was shaking and begging like a crying baby when the creatures passed by his compartment and there are rumours he soiled himself too.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me,” said Nigel before pouring marmalade on his bread.

“Let’s ignore him,” advised Antony Goldstein. “The ‘wait-until-my-father-hears-of-this’ is no longer in the Slytherin Quidditch team and his rankings would be far lower if he had not a Potions Master giving him ‘O’ because he is breathing correctly.”

“Speaking of the team...” said Roger. “You’re willing to continue as Reserve Seeker, Alexandra?”

“Sure,” the third-year girl answered. “Cho Chang remains the titular?”

Their Captain nodded and left them to their breakfast plus the reading of the schedules. Naturally with the arrival of the third-year electives, there were far less empty cases symbolising ‘free time’. And below each the weekly planning, there was a reminder from Professor Flitwick there were to choose two partners and a project before Halloween/Samhain.

“Our Mondays are going to be horrible. Look at that: the morning isn’t too bad with Astronomy theory and Charms, but after lunch we have double Potions and at night it’s Astronomy practical.”

“Tuesday could be very good or very bad,” reminded her Morag. “We have double DADA for the morning, and double Herbology for the afternoon.”

Wednesday was not going to be very funny but not worth mentioning. Double Transfiguration was on the menu for the morning, followed by Potions and then Arithmancy. Thursday – today – was elective’s day with Arithmancy and Runes, separated by Transfiguration and lunch. There were apparently two classes of Runes: Hermione was going to be in the second one as she was going to Care of Magical Creatures before the class of Professor Babbling.

“Friday compensates for it. We have Charms all morning and History in the afternoon. I think it is plenty of fun and spell-casting to begin the day, and a nice nap to enjoy our digestion after lunch.”

But before Friday was Thursday and it was time to discover how difficult the electives were going to be, beginning by Arithmancy and Professor Vector, who had gained a formidable reputation in the four-five years she was teaching here.

“Hermione we should go, the classroom is in the northern wing...” Morag and Nigel didn’t stand, instead raising their hands in dramatic salute.

Traitors.

They weren’t the only ones to finish their breakfast and walk with Arithmancy books in their bags. Padma Patil, Michael Corner and Kevin Entwhistle were accompanying them and after five stairs Alexandra saw that the Carrow Twins were not far behind them.

“It looks like our class is going to be ridiculously small,” the teachers usually divided the students’ in two for the core classes, roughly twenty-two to twenty-five students. Compared to this, Arithmancy class was going to be absolutely tiny: five Ravenclaws and two Slytherins weren’t going to be counted as a big crowd...if one or two boys or girls were removed, there were almost down to a tutoring course.

“What are you expecting?” scoffed Michael Corner, climbing the stairs, brushing his air in a - vain - attempt to look more fashionable. “It’s Arithmancy, the Lions haven’t the brains, the Snakes can’t buy favours with the Professor, and the Badgers have easier options, they aren’t going to take a course they will be leaving in a few weeks...”

The progression in the northern wing was done in a silent atmosphere. This was not a location the Exiled had visited often save for a few exploration sprees. The Arithmancy classroom was on the third floor, the door was between several tapestries and paintings representing wizards and witches writing a lot of mathematical formula on black boards or throwing complicated spells.

As the door was opened but there was no Professor – there was eight minutes before the official start of the classes – the Ravenclaws and the Slytherin twins entered one by one and took their seats in front of a small desk, observing their new surroundings. The walls were covered by various Greek letters and math calculus. There were also recordings of spells she wasn’t familiar with. Obviously, Hermione was smiling, this atmosphere being half of the paradise she was promised when she signed for the electives.

Thirty seconds before the bell rang, Professor Vector arrived and locked the door behind her. She was a young woman, in her thirties by Alexandra’s estimations though it was always hard to have the correct age as wizards and witches aged more slowly than non-mages. The Professor had light brown hairs, dark green eyes and was wearing a long black robe similar to the one the students wore as part of the Hogwarts uniform.

“Good morning class,” she said in a voice which was not particularly strict, but it was not the jovial salute of Flitwick.

“Good morning, Professor.” The seven third-years replied.

“I am Professor Septima Vector. I am the Professor of the Arithmancy elective at Hogwarts. And since I am not a hypocrite, I do not wish you a pleasant future in the noble art of Arithmancy.”

Alexandra was surprised and most of the classroom showed similar levels of shock and surprise.

“This is nothing personal,” continued the light brown-haired witch. “Arithmancy has a lot of theory and practical parts, and I’ve seen your records: the majority of you chose my course because you are bright students and can recognise the value of my teachings for your magical skills, your future careers or by simple pleasure to seek knowledge.

But you are late, terribly late.”

The teacher agitated her wand and her name was written on the blackboard, along with a series of names, half of them looking like book titles in German, French or other foreign languages.

“Arithmancy is NOT an elective in the other great European schools.”

Professor Vector left enough time for her revelation to be assimilated before resuming her speech.

“While it is not known under this name, students on the continent are known to study the principles of Arithmancy as one of their first classes when they are only eleven years-old. The Masters of Durmstrang teach it under the name ‘Spell-Crafting and Numerology Theory’. The warlocks of Beauxbatons are more poetic, calling their teachings ‘Mysteries of the Unseen and the Essence’ but make no mistake, it is Arithmancy. These books,” Septima Vector’s gesture was directed at the titles written on the board, “are some of the core reading your continental counterparts have absorbed while you were wasting your time with Lockhart’s ridiculous quizzes.”

This was not something either Alexandra or the rest of the class particularly enjoyed learning. Of course, Durmstrang and Beauxbatons had logically bad students too and the Morrigan’s Champion was not worried about the French equivalent of Crabbe and Goyle being granted two additional years of education. Unless Arithmancy boosted ten times their intelligence, these two years would not provide a great advantage.

But if the clever ones really had a two years-advantage...

“You can see the dilemma I faced when I began teaching at Hogwarts. I could teach you the same ICW-approved curriculum existing at the other magical schools, but in this case your NEWTS would be a low-grade ICW License and thoroughly unsuitable if you want to be hired on a job outside Britain. In the end, I decided I would do you and your predecessors no favour by choosing this strategy. Thus I decided the entire ICW program was going to be done in five years instead of the seven-eight it is usually done.”

Kevin Entwhistle hissed and the noise Flora and Hestia Carrow had snake-like stupefaction in it too.

“Yes, Mr. Entwhistle, Mrs. Carrow and Carrow,” Professor Vector didn’t appear surprised by the murmur of stupefaction rising after they had listened to her speech. For sure, every student choosing Arithmancy in September had to have sudden objections to voice. “It looks as unpleasant as it sounds. If you accept the challenge, you will have to learn and prove the two first years of ICW-level Arithmancy in a bit less than nine months.”

Hermione looked more determined than ever, eager at the idea of more academic work. Michael Corner was presenting a dubitative expression, however.

“Why are we supposed to swallow everything the ICW wants? Many OWLS don’t care about the ICW Licenses and Masteries!”

By the sardonic smile on their teacher’s lips, this question had to be one of the common ones.

“Because Mr. Corner, Arithmancy isn’t a class you can’t practise by building your knowledge on crumbling foundations. The Arithmancy analysis for simplest spells like Lumos or Wingardium Leviosa can and will be extremely dangerous for your health if you try to modify one of their variables and your knowledge of Numerology is false.”

By the rebellious he made, the Ravenclaw boy wasn’t completely convinced but he appeared to think seriously about the arguments presented.

“As I already said, Arithmancy is extremely difficult and I don’t accept any group projects on it before sixth-year. To be brutally honest, you will be far too busy to follow my teachings to waste your spare time in more Arithmancy. Overall, I never had more than five students taking their OWLS the same year and NEWTS Arithmancy is on average reduced to one or two students.”

A pile of folders was levitated from Professor Vector’s bag and one by one they landed on their desks.

“When a wizard asks the question ‘what is Arithmancy?’, he’d better not expect a simple answer for they are none. Arithmancy is not just spell-crafting or some arcane numbers. Arithmancy is those things, but it is the sums of the structure tens of thousands of witches and wizards have created to manipulate the forces of the world by the power of our mind. Each equation, each combination, each spell and ritual, are just tiny parts of the great entity millions have spent their whole life studying and mapping. The comprehension of Arithmancy is still a work on progress and impacts every discipline, for the exceptions found in this work are influencing Transfiguration, Charms or other branches of magic.”

A twirl of her wand, and the folders were turned to reveal...a test. It was a very large test, with a lot of complicated symbols and plenty of mathematics. Alexandra grimaced and even Hermione’s smile vanished this time.

Wonderful.

The green-eyed witch had read and completed the book exercises Dudley’s gang had used during the school year, and she had read the Arithmancy books before coming to this class.

Despite this preparation, she was fairly certain it was not going to be fun at all.

After reading the first page, Alexandra had to amend her judgement: it was considerably worse. Taking her quill, she sighed and began to resolve what looked like a very nasty equation...

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“I’m leaving Arithmancy! I didn’t sign for this insanity!”

“And now we’re down to six students,” Alexandra commented to Hermione after hearing Michael Corner’s outburst in the corridor.

“I would bet on five,” retorted Morag, who had just arrived from Muggle studies. “I saw Kevin in the corridor, and he wasn’t presenting exactly a champion’s motivation...”

“No, he wouldn’t, would he?”

Alexandra would love to say she blamed him, but this math test had just been nightmarish and for the first time in months, she knew there was no way she was going to achieve ‘O’ on this test. An ‘Acceptable’ wouldn’t be so bad...

Plus they had a roll of parchment of homework for next Wednesday, on the importance of the number twelve in magical society and the basic structure of the Lumos Charm.

“By the way Nigel, what are you all showing funeral faces? Divination...”

But asking him the reason Gryffindors and Ravenclaws were silent and pale would have to wait. Professor McGonagall arrived and began to explain to them the program of third-year for Transfiguration.

Perhaps because it was the first day of the year and the Head of Gryffindor wanted to encourage them pursue a career involving Transfiguration, the class was not a verification of second-year spells or a lesson developing the knowledge of the previous spring. No, today was lesson on Animagi, these wizards having the fun ability to transform themselves into an animal.

“From the moment the Statute of Secrecy was promulgated, it became a law requirement the Animagus witches and wizards had to be registered...one unchangeable animal form for every wizard...extremely difficult...do not attempt it before Mastery...”

Needless to say, the lesson had started on an interesting note but soon boredom was in power. It was obvious McGonagall was not going to help them become Animagi; in fact her very lesson was seemingly conceived to discourage any students trying to take their chance.

It was too bad, because being an Animagus offered a lot of benefits. Just to begin with, you were immunised against the lycanthropy and the different curses of were-beings. Mentally, the completion of an Animagus form offered a major defensive mental protection without studying a single second of Occlumency of Legilimency training. Physically, some of the animals’ physical traits were transferred to your human body. Magically, you gained a minor boost for your magical core.

Of course, this knowledge had been learned in the books of Morag’s family at MacDougal Manor. The one she had opened on her desk today was just repeating the imbecilities printed by the Ministry. Becoming an Animagus was extremely dangerous, blah, blah, blah, and seriously the little bits of the procedure looked like something going against the very principles of ritual magic. And there was absolutely no mention of the Animagi practises in foreign countries.

Alexandra made a note and passed it to Morag, telling her they had to interrogate Lyre on the subject this evening.

Professor McGonagall transformed twice into a cat, but the Head of Gryffindor looked irritated she was receiving too little applause.

“Really, what has got into you all today? Not that it matters, but it’s the first time my transformation’s not got applause from a class.”

Nearly every head in the class turned towards Neville...and her. Lavender Brown raised her hand.

“Please, Professor, we’ve just had our first Divination class, and we were reading the tea leaves, and – “

“Ah, of course,” the frown on Professor McGonagall’s visage was impressive. “There is no need to say anymore, Miss Brown. Tell me, which of you will be dying this year?”

The Ravenclaw in her had to fight an urge to giggle.

“Me and Alexandra Potter,” said the Boy-Who-Lived after a brief silence.

Alexandra stopped fighting her hilarity and burst into laughter. Surprisingly, there were many Gryffindors and Ravenclaws looking outraged she dared mocking the fraud called Trelawney. Had they removed their brains during summer and forgot to put them back into their skulls?

“Didn’t the good Professor predict Thomson Carrow last year was going to live up to one hundred and have thirty grandchildren?” It was difficult speaking because she was laughing far too much. “She also predicted Professor Lockhart was the Heir of Slytherin and that Oliver Wood was his accomplice...”

“Indeed,” said the Head of Gryffindor, who was fixing Neville Longbottom with stern eyes. “You should know, Longbottom, that Sybil Trelawney has predicted the death of at least one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing deaths omens is her favourite way of greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues...”

She would say the woman was a fraud which had no business teaching anywhere near children or teenagers. The current Divination Professor was avoided by every character of importance in the field of Divination and many people had wondered why Dumbledore was spending money on someone whose predictions of the weathers were worse than a newly Sorted eleven year-old.

“Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic.”

Yes, in hindsight choosing Arithmancy was the correct decision, thank you very much Professor.

“I shall not conceal from you I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney...”

And then Professor McGonagall lightened the morose atmosphere.

“Mr. Longbottom, Mrs. Potter, you both looks like in excellent health to me, so you will excuse me if I don’t let you off homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in.”

This one made the Ravenclaw students erupt into laughter and giggles, though some Gryffindors looked reluctant to think Trelawney was unsuited to teach them anything.

“Well it looks like Trelawney is the Binns of the electives with a predilection towards death omens,” announced Morag as they took one of the many secret passages behind a tapestry to descend faster towards the Great Hall and lunch. “How does it feel to know Trelawney has decided you were going to die, Alex?”

“Boring,” after killing a Dementor last evening, honestly who cared what this drunk harridan thought? “A real Seer would have announced the date, the circumstances and the culprit, but I suppose it was way over her skill...”

McGonagall was a strict teacher and never let them go before the bell, and the crowd they had to pass by before reaching the Great Hall was massive. To make things more difficult, there were a lot of first and second-years in it, and they all stopped to gawk at her before whispering in excitation.

“I was more interested by the Animagus lesson at first but I would have loved more specifics. The books I read during summer were mentioning a lot of benefits for completing the transformation...”

Hermione didn’t show a lot of enthusiasm.

“We are already going to be very busy with the extra-classes...we haven’t really the time for transforming...”

“I was thinking about it like a long-term project...provided the Animagus form is interesting.” If her animal form was a rat like the one of Peter Pettigrew, best to forget about it.

Lunch passed very fast, as for the entire period of luck they discussed the advantages and drawbacks of being able to transform yourself at will into an animal. Then Hermione and Nigel departed for the grounds and the field outside serving for the Care of Magical Creatures class while Alexandra and Morag went for the western wing and Ancient Runes.

“It looks like we are going to be a Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff class...” the first remark of Morag had the merit to describe the assembly waiting for Professor Babbling.

For their own House, the contingent of Arithmancy this morning was there in the persons of Padma Patil, Michael Corner and Kevin Entwhistle. In addition to them, there was Stephen Cornfoot, Anthony Goldstein, Mandy Brocklehurst and Lisa Turpin. The only other Ravenclaws she didn’t see were Terry Boot and Su Li. Maybe like Hermione they had taken Care of Magical Creatures.

For Hufflepuff, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot, Justin Finch-Fletchey, Megan Jones, Lily Moon and Zacharias Smith had decided to take the class. The last four reacted to her arrival with various sneers or expression of disgust. Smith even had the courage to whisper ‘Death Eater’s daughter’ when he believed she wasn’t listening to him.

The door of the classroom opened on this, stopping her amusement at the incredible courage of Smith and the other Hufflepuffs. Ah, it would have been rather simple to rally a massive army to smash the Basilisk if the Badgers weren’t so ready to hide when danger roamed in the corridors.

“Good afternoon, class.”

“Good afternoon, Professor Babbling.”

The classroom of Ancient Runes looked like someone had robbed an antiquity museum and taken with him randomly objects which had runes or various scripts on them. There were amphora, pieces of columns, funeral mosaics and a multitude of ancient things which should be studied in an archaeology department rather than waiting on pedestals at Hogwarts.

Professor Babbling didn’t seem out of place: with her dark skin and her very non-British clothes, the forty-something witch had the attire and the attitude of someone who had dug tombs and crossed several desert to fulfil her passions.

“Welcome to the world of Ancient Runes. I hope it will be an elective for you as rewarding as it is rewarding for me.”

The teacher began to half-walk, half-dance on around the tables, pointing at some ancient artefacts, making the runes carved in stone or other materials pulse with magical energy.

“Ancient Runes is one of the most ancient disciplines known to wizardkind. We have found evidence of rune-carving over nine thousand years ago, preceding the inventions of sceptre and wand by at least a couple of thousand years.”

A sort of Egyptian mini-sphinx shone like a rainbow and everyone applauded in the room.

“When it comes to Runes, there are only three great rules to follow. Rule one: the greater effort and power given to accomplish a task, the greater the return. Rule two: knowledge is power, guards it well. Rule three: do not, under any reason, attempt to break the veil separating the living from the dead.”

The two first rules had brought many smiles. Rule three put stone-cold expressions on the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs faces.

“Following Rule One, you will accept there will no use for your wand during this class. Not unless you achieve an ‘E’ during your OWLS and I have the pleasure to teach you the NEWT curriculum during your sixth and seventh year. Uttering an incantation to put some words on a parchment or a stone will produce without question insignificant results magically. The runes will be carved manually in this class with appropriate daggers enchanted for apprentices of your skill-level.”

Professor Babbling returned to the front of the class but instead of sitting on her chair she used the empty desk for support.

“Each rune you will discover in this class is a remnant of a past magical era. The wizards and witches who do not practise Ancient Runes have by their own accord refused to learn the magical legacies the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Norses and many other great civilisations left us. Once studied the past, there is the present to consider too. If you want to succeed in careers like Ward-Master, Curse-Breaker or Enchanter, knowledge of Runes is critical.”

Line by line, the blackboard covered itself in instructions and paragraphs titles. Clearly, it was the program for third-year.

“As you can see, the program for your third-year in Ancient Runes is fairly straightforward. For nine months, we will study together the intricacies of Elder Futhark, the most commonly used Germanic Runic language this century. From September to April you will learn how to memorise each rune, carve them in stone and use them in Galdr and Lokk, the equivalent of our sentences in the English tongue. Those I will consider sufficiently advanced by April will start channelling magic into their creations under my supervision and nowhere else.”

Hannah Abbot’s hand rose timidly in the air.

“Yes, Miss Abbot?”

“How will we be graded, Professor?”

Professor Babbling gave a thin smile to the blonde Hufflepuff.

“I am forced to follow the rules governing all electives, thus a third of your final mark in Ancient Runes will be decided in the final exam of May. I can assure you if you study regularly and complete all your homework in time and hour, there will be no reason to panic.”

Then the smile transformed into something more stern and demanding.

“The second third of the mark will be given thorough the year. I will give from time to time small tests or assign longer essays which will be graded and entered in your academic record. I will not do it for every homework assignment, but there will be times I will do it. Consider it my friendly warning. During the last years, I’ve discovered it is a wonderful method to judge your personal involvement in this class.”

Professor Babbling made a sign of her hand and instantly all the rune-lights in the room and the candles were snuffed out, leaving only the meek sun to provide a little light.

“Ancient Runes is an elective, I will not deny this, but it is a discipline which demands dedication and the time I spend on every student is very valuable. There have been students in previous years which missed half of the classes and yet were the first to shout in protestation when they weren’t authorised in my fourth-year class. I pray none of you will be one of them. I will not hide the fact that at the end of your year, only students with ‘Acceptable’ or higher will be given the chance to explore further the astounding subject of Ancient Runes. Yes, Mr. Smith?”

“You haven’t told us what the last third of our Runes grade was done”, said in a powerful nasal voice the snob Hufflepuff.

“Indeed, I haven’t.” The lights came back all at the same time. “Look around you, students of Hogwarts. In this room, over ten thousand years of knowledge are facing you and much less I hate to admit it, learning it all is completely impossible during your time at Hogwarts. If you are advancing well, you will have learned two runic languages per year at the end of your NEWTS. That’s eight scripts of Ancient Runes...and the most pessimistic estimations recognise over three hundred different civilisations using them.”

Reactions to this explanation varied between awe and disappointment.

“Therefore this year your long-term project will be to study one script of Runes on your own. I forbid channelling magic into runes and most type of practical sessions unless I am here to give you my blessing, but theory and other types of learning are approved. Regularly all over the year, I will set meetings outside the school hours in order to assess your progress and eventually redirect your efforts if I see your difficulties are insurmountable. To reassure you, the grade you will receive on the subject is not conditioned to your success or your failure. I will make sure efforts are rewarded to their just measure. And yes, since it is a project, the work will be done in trio.”

Any man or woman who thought Hufflepuff was the least dangerous House in the centuries-old institution of Hogwarts would have quickly changed his tune if he watched the sea of predatory looks the Badgers sent to the Ravenclaws.

“I will not impose restrictions by House; those limits tend to destroy the spirit of cooperation essential for the comprehension of Runes. I will invite you however to not limit yourself to your friends and accept different point of views in your project. By the end of this month, I will expect the groups to be created and the topic of your project chosen.”

There was no ‘or else’ but there was an undertone in Professor Babbling’s speech they would not like the consequences if they failed this simple homework.

“Now with these formalities out of the way, we are going to speak of the origins of Elder Futhark. According to Professor Offenhauser, the first signs...”

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“I was beginning to worry, Daphne. Five more minutes, and I would have gone back to the dorms.”

Susan did her best to sound bored while in her head she was smiling widely. That the Greengrass Heiress was late would have been a surprise any other day, knowing the blonde-haired Slytherin maniac tendencies on punctuality and decorum. But after the events of this afternoon in Care of Magical Creatures, the fact the pure-blood girl had not managed to arrive in time was kind of expected.

“There were...internal problems to deal with in the dungeons.”

“You mean you were busy retaking control after Malfoy and Parkinson are once again the laughingstock of Hogwarts.”

The Slytherin snorted and Susan replied by an innocent smile. On most occasions, any lesson which could qualify as ‘memorable’ was known to the entire student and teacher body in hours. Less if there was a massive amount of House Points lost or won.

The Care of Magical Creatures lesson which had taken place this afternoon was definitely going to be remembered a long time in the different Common Rooms - from the depths of the dungeons to the top of Ravenclaw Tower.

Professor Grubbly-Plank, Professor Kettleburn’s replacement, had decided the first lesson of the third-year was going to be a practical session on the Crup. On parchment, this species was XXX, justified by the carrion-glutton attitude of the modified dogs. But as the young Crups brought for the lesson were sent by a reputed owner of Hogsmeade and these loyal companions of wizards had been trained to be docile and loyal, there shouldn’t have been any problem. Professor Grubbly-Plank had given the various procedures and Charms to handle the Crups. Food and drink had been disposed on several buckets and the Crups had accepted gladly this improvised meal.

Unfortunately, Draco Malfoy and his goons had been so busy imitating Dementors with their robes and hoods in order to mock Longbottom that they hadn’t bothered to listen to a single instruction given by the new teacher. Moreover, the Slytherins had been so absorbed by their idiocy Parkinson had walked on a Crup from behind.

Then the XXX-class creature had justified why it was judged dangerous in unregulated conditions. Before anyone had the time to react, Pansy’s right leg was bitten and when she tried to defend herself, her left leg suffered the same fate. As for Malfoy, he had tried to kick the Crup before drawing his wand...but too slowly and he had not watched his back. Consequently, he was unable to see another Crup had rushed to the rescue of the first animal and bit him deeply in the backside.

By the time Professor Grubbly-Plank separated animals and students, the two Slytherins had been wounded several times in a non-lethal manner but at places which were...extremely humiliating, shall we say?

Since the brain-dead moron was currently the guest of Madam Pomfrey, they would have to wait one or two days to see how House Slytherin was going to react in public, but already there were whispers in the corridor of banishments and probation. House Slytherin had lost fifty points thanks to Malfoy and his gang, and the loss of reputation was admittedly even worse. Professor Grubbly-Plank had not wanted to let this behaviour go unpunished. Parkinson and Malfoy were in detention for a whole week with Filch and Hagrid, while Crabbe and Goyle had received a week of punishments with McGonagall and the new Care Professor.

“Yes Susan. I can admit I was not ready for Malfoy to give me that much power to convince the elder students he was a disgrace upon the reputation of House Slytherin.” That the Ice Queen was allowed to voice this to an outsider was particularly telling how in two days Malfoy had destroyed his chances to restore his leadership.

The great question was if Daphne Greengrass was going to be better in command of the third-years. Susan Bones knew she may be a bit prejudiced, but honestly House Greengrass was not good news. Officially, the Greengrass name had been a bastion of neutrality in the last war. Unofficially, a lot of gold had poured in Death Eater’s hands from their vaults, and several of their lesser branches had perished with Dark Eaters on their forearms.

As future Lady of a nearly-extinguished House, Susan was ready to accept the view her parents and grandparents’ support of the Order of the Phoenix had not been the best choice of the century. This didn’t mean she was in agreement with the stupid Death Eater ideals or ready to befriend someone seeking power and influence over friendship and loyalty.

“But the incident of this afternoon can be discussed later. For the present, I want to know if you would be interested to join me as a partner for the Rune year-project and eventually all other group projects of this year.”

Well, she owed Hannah two Sickles on this one. Her best friend had told her Greengrass was going to go after the best students of the second-year rankings, and since she had finished fourth overall, Susan knew she was a prime choice.

Once this was said, Susan was not going to accept on a whim. First, because while the Ice Queen was tolerable most of the time, she still remained a Slytherin and thus to approach with precaution. Secondly, Susan was high in the rankings but Daphne was not; the blonde had finished twenty-third last June. Granted Runes was a new class and Daphne might thrive in it with the archives of her family, but caution was warranted.

“Assuming I would be interested in accepting you for a Rune-year project...” and she was, sort of: Professor Babbling had told them multi-House trio were encouraged and Susan was not going to go against a Professor’s advice without reason. “What Rune language were you thinking about?”

“Hieroglyphs,” was the curt answer from Daphne.

Susan blinked. This was incredibly ambitious. The Egyptian Runes were undoubtedly one of the most powerful dialects in the field, courtesy of thousands of years of refinement and research, but it was also one of the most difficult. Sumerian and a few Chinese Rune languages were said to surpass the talent of the legendary scribes, but it was definitely at the apex of Ancient Runes.

“You realise hieroglyphs are...kind of reserved to the elite, right?”

“Power will not be an obstacle for us, Susan.”

Susan had not thought another student would declare both were Ladies-in-being on the first day. This day was full of surprises and the nice of Amelia Bones had the feeling this wasn’t over.

“I was thinking about Norse Runes...” but the Greengrass Heiress shook her head in a silent no.

“We will have a confirmation in a few days if rumours of inter-school tournament are true, but I think it is best to be prepared for a worst-case scenario. Norse Runes are one of the strong points of the Durmstrang students. It won’t give us an advantage.”

“You realise hieroglyphs are several levels more complicated than Norse Runes, right? If we fail the project, we will have only Elder Futhark at the end of third year...”

And Susan certainly didn’t intend to enter any legendary Tournament, thank you. She was the last hope for the survival of her House, and she wasn’t going to risk her life for a few Galleons when she had already a sizeable fortune waiting for her seventeenth birthday.

But the Ice Queen’s proposal has merits. Learning the theory on their own was going to be difficult, but it would be a challenge. And while Daphne wasn’t a genius, she wasn’t a dead weight like Nott or Malfoy.

“So that’s a yes?”

“Who do you have in mind for the third member of our group? You need someone powerful and talented...”

“And someone who isn’t a Gryffindor,” added the blue-eyed cold beauty of House Slytherin. “I may not be the most academically-inclined student, but including a Lion in our project would be a guarantee to fail. They are factors of disturbance, and they can’t keep secrets on their activities to save their life.”

As Longbottom and Black had not taken Ancient Runes for electives, this was not a big loss. Besides, the Golden Trio was not going to consent to work with anyone they considered ‘Dark’. Once she had these criteria in mind, the person Greengrass had in mind was not difficult to name.

“I assume you don’t want Padma Patil...”

“Of course not. I don’t want this harpy of Parvati to have a day-per-day report on our project.”

Susan opened her mouth to counter the acid argument but she realised Daphne was right: what Padma knew, Parvati was going to hear in hours and for all the Hufflepuff in her, Susan didn’t wish for everything she did in private to be commented and dissected by the gossipers of Gryffindor Tower before being disseminated thorough the castle next breakfast.

“In this case...I suppose you best have an indestructible strategy to convince a Basilisk-Slayer...”

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The sun had set several minutes ago over the castle and Alexandra was seriously beginning to wonder if she had made a good choice choosing Arithmancy for one of her electives.

It was the first day of class and she was already in the library after dinner. And for this it wasn’t the essay of Transfiguration she had to blame. That and the Rune homework had been expedited in the afternoon. No, it was the roll of parchment on the analysis of the Lumos which was the cause of her long stay in the domain of Madam Pince. Lumos. The Light spell they had mastered by October of first year and that she irregularly overpowered in combat conditions to blind her opponents. Who would have believed analysing the characteristics and principles of this first-year Charm was such a chore?

To make this period in the library more unbearable, she was alone for the moment as Hermione and Nigel had gone to Flitwick for her first meeting as a Ravenclaw and Morag had treacherously abandoned her after delivering her the news she had found group partners for the Rune project in the person of Hannah Abbot and Seamus Finnigan. Sweet bribery and a lot of favours had been given to convince the pure-blood Irish Heiress and in return Morag accepted to study Carthaginian-created Runes.

Alexandra looked at the great silver clock in the distance. Still a good half an hour before going back to the study room of the Exiled and she was just half the way through the Arithmancy assignment. If this was the prelude to what Professor Vector had in mind for them in her class, Thursday evenings were going to be very busy academically.

The Potter Heiress heard the footsteps before they revealed their presence. Her eyes didn’t rise from the paragraph on the wand movements of the Lumos she was trying to complete. Writing with good enchanted quills was becoming easier, but at the first error it was a pain to erase the mistake, even with magical corrector spells.

“Merlin and Morgana, I am so glad I didn’t take Arithmancy...”

Alexandra raised her head to meet the eyes of a girl she had not had much reason to talk with the first two years: Susan Bones, Hufflepuff and Heiress of House Bones. The other girl behind her at least she was more familiar with: Daphne Greengrass, Heiress of House Greengrass.

“Please give me one minute to finish this paragraph,” Alexandra said politely. As she wrote the last words on the parchment – there were still about ten lines or so of information to write but she would do it in History tomorrow – the Ravenclaw third-year took the opportunity to remind the Ice Queen a disturbing rumour she had heard after Runes.

“Heiress Greengrass, you will remind Heir Ardoch the ideology of the Heir of Slytherin died with him last April. I would be very unhappy to learn the Snake’s Den is once more recruiting Junior Death Eaters.”

“I...I will make sure the mistakes of last year are not repeated.” The pale blonde stammered.

“See that you do,” Alexandra sighed in relief as she cleaned her quill before placing it in her school bag.

“I hope you’re not talking of murder in front of the former DMLE Director’s niece, you know,” told Susan, taking a posture on her seat which made Alexandra suddenly very jealous. By the beard of the dwarves, Morag had exploded in curves everywhere, but it was nothing compared to the breasts the future Bones Lady now could exhibit when she had no Hogwarts robe to hide under. Yes, Susan had become very attractive in a few months...why by the White Tower was she thinking about this?

Daphne Greengrass went back instantly to an inhuman stare while she stared at the Hufflepuff girl. Alexandra just scoffed and decided to tell what was in some twisted way the truth.

“Don’t be ridiculous Susan. Killing someone is tiring, bloody and by my experiences of the Basilisk affair, I can tell you it doesn’t generate half of the results intended. Oh and it also buries you under a mountain of parchment for months. It isn’t worth the trouble.”

No, if Dermot Ardoch didn’t stop his bigoted and unfounded prejudices before month’s end, Alexandra would try to make a very experimental Portkey and try sending him in the middle of Siberia. Let’s see how his ‘natural superiority’ triumphed over the fury of a Russian winter.

“I assume you didn’t come to speak about the innocent Snakes our wise and caring Headmaster chose to let go without a proper investigation.”

“No, we want you to join us in our Rune project.”

“I already refused Thomas and Smith, why should I say yes to your proposal?”

“First, we aren’t arrogant dunderheads.”

Alexandra laughed a bit at this one. Once again, the rumour mill had worked over time. These were the exact words she had told Zacharias before hexing him when he refused to move.

“I will grant you this one. Anything else?”

Apparently, the convincing had been negotiated to be Greengrass’ part because it was the Ice Queen who answered again.

“I suggest studying the Hieroglyphs this year as a Runes project and we can always extend the proposal to the general group project if our trio works well.”

“Hieroglyphs are usually proposed by Professor Babbling for brilliant NEWTS students,” Alexandra enounced slowly, inwardly shrieking at the idea of more of her beloved free time dying under the dreaded axe of homework.

It took her a couple of seconds to realise the trap she had just fallen into.

“Exactly, and you are a brilliant witch, no?”

Pride and modesty fought each other and ultimately Alexandra decided to not answer a question where her reputation might not survive.

“I assume you agree with her plans, Susan?”

“I agreed to try,” said the red-headed Hufflepuff, giving her puppy eyes. Damn, it had to be a crime to be so adorable with her nice red hairs and her amber eyes...

“That still sounds particularly risky,” she exhaled a loud breath. “I have already Arithmancy on my schedule and other personal things, I don’t want to...”

“I will bribe you with books.” Daphne’s voice had taken a more hurried and precipitated tone.

“Ah yes the good old tactic of luring the Ravens by offering them knowledge and vast collection of books. It is a view horribly full of prejudices and deriding us as bookworms and teacher pets, you know.”

Alexandra sighed for the scenic effect.

“But then most of the time it works so I suppose I can’t fault you for using it. I will give you a few titles next week I want to read...”

There were after all subjects she hadn’t been able to find either in the Hogwarts Library or at Zabini Manor. Alchemy, for example, was one of the subjects she would dearly like to have an introduction into but thus far she hadn’t been unable to find a book not filled with Ministry regulations.

“Where will we meet? I know you have a study room somewhere...”

“Nice try Susan, but the library will suffice for the first meetings on Saturday afternoon. I am not going to invite us to our sanctuary just because we’re doing a project together...”

“You’re no fun...”

Alexandra tried very hard not to look in the direction of Susan when she stood off her seat and tried to show off...neck, cleavage... and let’s stop at that. Daphne departed seconds after and total silence returned to this section of the library.

Since there was no way she was going to complete the Arithmancy in mere minutes, the Ravenclaw black-haired student threw her documentation and essays in her school bag before marching to the Exiled’s headquarters.

To her absolute lack of surprise, Alexandra was the last to arrive, although by the fact they hadn’t removed yet their long robes, Hermione and Nigel had had to arrive less than five minutes ago. Morag, Lyre and Luna Lovegood had more than compensated by creating a large pile of parchment however.

“Good, I see everyone is here. Tonight, I have three topics I would like to debate on. The first, and in mind the most important one, are the defences and the contingencies we must prepare in case the Exchequer decides to attack Hogwarts.

Secondly, we have to agree on a timetable for our newspaper. We have the ink, the paper and the contacts so I would say it’s time to decide what we want to do with it and decide what we will call it.

Thirdly, I feel the opportunity of becoming an Animagus should be explored. McGonagall and her Ministry-droning instructions are doing their best to discourage us, but it would provide us a lot of advantages if we managed to gain this ability.

Is there anyone who wants to add something to the order of the day?”