

The Most Dangerous Time of the Year The Ousting of the Opposition

The Ousting of the Opposition began, as tradition demanded, just before dawn. Silent on predator paws or spell-muffled feet, certain students crept into certain dormitories of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (or, in many cases, simply sat up, rolled over, or leaned down) and marked certain beds with a spray of white sparkles, which settled onto bedcurtains and bedposts, looking rather like an indoor snowfall to match the weather outside.

Behind the students came the house-elves, muffling giggles behind their long-fingered hands, spreading out to touch the heavy pieces of furniture at two or three points at once. Then, at some secret elfish signal, together with their burdens they disappeared, with a sound like so many thunderclaps.

In the dormitory known as Old Firsties A (denoting its location in Old Gryffindor Tower, now given over entirely to the witches of that House, and its function as one of the two rooms in that tower housing first year students), Katie Weasley dusted off her hands in satisfaction as four of the eight beds in the room vanished. "There," she said, sliding out of bed and tucking her feet hastily into her slippers. "*That's* done."

"Where will the house-elves have taken them?" inquired her friend Hui, a petite Muggleborn witch who was now the only other occupant of the dorm (their final two dormmates, likewise Muggleborn, had gone home for the holidays rather than staying to take part in the Winter War). "It's awfully cold to sleep outdoors."

"Didn't you hear the horns blowing yesterday?" Katie scooped up her hairbrush and went to work on the bushy red curls which were her joint inheritance from her mother and her father. She often envied her three older siblings, all of whom had far more manageable combinations when it came to hair. "They were announcing that the invaders had arrived, that they were pitching camp. We can go up on the Towers after breakfast and have a look at all the tents if you like. I'm sure they've surrounded us by now, and as soon as they get themselves together we'll be attacked."

Hui giggled as she slid her feet into her own slippers. "It sounds so silly when you say it like that," she said, joining her friend at the mirror to smooth the sleep-borne tangles from her own sleek black hair. "All calm and even happy about it, when it was your mum and dad and aunts and uncles and grandparents and all who were fighting here for real, back before we were born."

"Nineteen years ago this Halloween." Katie made a face at her reflection. "I'm glad it wasn't us. Real

wars are stupid and horrible, with all the fighting and the getting killed and the hiding and running away."

"Katie!" shouted an exuberant voice from the corridor outside. "Katie Katie Katie Katie!"

"Speaking of running away," murmured Hui half a second before the door burst open.

"Oh no!" Katie leapt up onto her bed, pretending horror at the sight of the small blonde child who had barreled into the room like a whirlwind. "It's a wild Ella Bee! Somebody save me!"

Eleanor Beauvoi giggled gleefully and proceeded to snatch at her cousin's ankles, until Hui scooped her up and hung her nonchalantly over one arm. "Got her," she said, and turned to face the girl only slightly younger than the two occupants of the dorm who was leaning against the doorframe, watching the byplay. "Is this yours?" she inquired, holding up her squirming, kicking burden.

"Whatever would give you that idea?" The newcomer ran a hand across her short, spiked hair, a similar shade of dark blonde to that of the smaller girl, though it was liberally streaked throughout with green. "I certainly don't want her. Matter of fact, I don't think anybody wanted her. Dad and Mum least of all. She just showed up one day about five years ago, and we thought we might as well keep her. Less trouble than throwing her back."

Ella Bee, so called to differentiate her from her much older courtesy cousin Ella Li, stuck out her tongue at her sister Anita Cecilia. "Ace is a big fat liar," she announced. "Mummy and Daddy did *too* want me. And Jacob wanted me too. And Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny and Reenie and Nate and Evanna wanted me, and Uncle Ron and Aunt Neenie and David and Esther and Luke and Katie—"

"Only sometimes," Katie murmured, but Ella Bee was in full flow.

"And Uncle Captain and Aunt Meghan and Andy and Brian and Russ!" the little girl finished triumphantly, turning the final sibilant of her cousin's name into a hissing sentence in Parseltongue, which Ace cut off by coming into the room and scooping her sister out of Hui's arms to sling her over a shoulder.

"Mind if we tag along for breakfast?" she asked, ignoring Ella Bee's wiggles and squeals. "The parents wanted to get here good and early, to talk strategy with Moony and Danger while the opposition's still sorting out all the newcomers the house-elves dumped on them, so we didn't have a chance to eat at home. And I'm not a legal field-fighter yet, but I can do support work. Like looking after this." She poked 'this' in the side, eliciting an even higher-pitched squeak. "How about you two? You're legal, now that you're students, at least for the general fighting."

"I'm still sorting out where I'm going to be, so I don't know yet." Hui opened her wardrobe to pull out warm, comfortable Muggle clothing and a clean set of day robes to go over it. "Aren't there tests or something today, to find that out?"

"Not tests, exactly." Katie waved her wand at her own wardrobe, opening the door and floating the clothing items she wanted off their respective hooks to her outstretched arm. "It's like Sorting, except

you do more than just sit there with the Hat on your head. They're trying you out, to see what you do well and not so well, and from there they can recommend where you'd fit in best. To make sure we keep hold of the castle, since it's ours to defend this year..."

Harry Potter gazed up at the towers of Hogwarts, allowing his mind to weave a narrative around them as fantastic as anything his godfather had ever written. For these few days of the War, he and all the other members of the Society for Combat Approximation would be, effectively, immortal. Fighters "killed" by the Society's weapons, which bore a suspiciously close resemblance to those Harry had once used for the Hogwarts Combat Club, would vanish from the field of battle (courtesy of house-elf referees), to be resurrected either after a set period of time or when a member of their own side performed some act so brave and daring that it merited such a reward.

"And this year, there's also a reward for winning the entirety of the War, other than just bragging rights." Harry leaned back and rolled his shoulders carefully, grimacing as they popped, one after the other. It still shocked him every so often that he had now reached the same general age his Pack-parents had been at the end of what his own cubs had dubbed the Voldy-Wars. "The winners get first crack at reorganizing the Society, or rather codifying the organization we've already got in place. I hope, if the other side wins it, they're smart enough to keep to that, instead of trying to put in something entirely new—no wizarding royalty, please, not even in play..."

"Worrying out loud again, love?" asked Ginny, poking her head out the back of their tent. "Get it out of your system while you can. We have a planning meeting after breakfast."

"I know, I know." Harry ducked around the tent flap and let it fall behind him, fastening it down with his wand. "Are we going to be visited by the thundering horde, or have they decided they'd rather eat somewhere else?"

"It's only half the thundering horde, with the way we're split up this year. And no, we aren't going to be invaded for the moment. Virginia's working her usual magic over in Captain and Pearl's place." Ginny shook her head. "All those years I joked about my house-elf twin, and then Dobby and Winky decided they liked the name and used it for their second daughter!"

"And Padfoot suggested their second son's name, mostly to tease Letha, but they took right to it. Which is how Matt and Natalie ended up with a house-elf named Elrond." Harry pulled a skillet out of a cupboard and set it on the stovetop. "Humans and house-elves see things kind of differently."

"Words of enduring and multifaceted wisdom."

"You're making fun of me, Mrs. Potter, aren't you?"

"Only when my lips are moving."

"Well." Harry reached around and pulled Ginny to his side. "We'll have to stop them doing that immediately."

Breakfast, by mutual consent, was slightly delayed.

Remus Lupin sat in his usual place in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, gazing out over a decidedly different population of breakfasters than he'd become accustomed to seeing during the course of the fall term. Where ordinarily he would have been greeted by a sea of near-identical black Hogwarts day robes, today the room was filled with a clashing medley of colors and styles, both Muggle and magical, though the effect managed to be cheerful rather than hideous.

That might have something to do with how happy everyone sounds, his wife Danger commented mentally from her place beside him, dropping another sausage onto his plate before serving herself two. **Now imagine if you could go back in time and show this moment, and the reason for it, to the Remus Lupin who went to school here, or the one who met me in the park that day.**

Ah, yes. Remus laughed. **"We're having a proper war at last!" as I heard our younger son shouting down the hallway this morning.**

That boy. Danger finished chewing and swallowed. "We never should have named him what we did, should we?" she went on aloud. "It seems to have had an influence on his behavior."

"Did you really expect anything else, from your child and mine, raised by us, Sirius, and Aletha?" Remus twirled a finger, surrounding his sausage with a light glow of flame. "We can't blame everything on his being called Alexander. Though I admit that he does occasionally seem to show a certain precocity when it comes to pranks involving water. Still, that could be the influence of his twin and her closest crony."

"Ah, yes." Danger snickered, tracing a sinuous line in a puddle of egg yolk with the tines of her fork. "Thank you for the warning last September, by the by. Sirius's face when you read off 'Snape, Felix' as the name of the next child to be Sorted and he realized he wasn't imagining things..."

"And when he'd been Sorted, for him to promptly go and sit down beside our Ariana at the Slytherin table, and them to clearly be picking up a conversation where they'd left it off." Remus judged his sausage properly charred and flicked the fire out, then stabbed the link with his fork and took a bite. **Not that I think Sirius was truly as horrified by it as he pretended,** he said silently, his mouth being otherwise occupied. **But he loves to play the game, and we all love to let him. Just like this, really.** He circled a hand around the well-occupied Great Hall, with its knots of cheerful Society members, starting to sort themselves out by specialty, along with the little groups of newcomers who were being gathered up by chatelaines and castellans (the Society members whose job it was to help the newly enrolled find their feet) for wartime aptitude tests.

"Precisely. A great and glorious game, every bit of it. Oh, speaking of which, have you seen the newspaper?" Danger reached over to the chair beside hers and produced a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. "Quite a scathing little editorial about the Society and the Winter War. Making an enormous fuss about the fact that an awful lot of employees of the Ministry, including a great many highly-ranked people, are here."

Remus swallowed in his turn. "Because how dare they use their duly allotted vacation time to engage in harmless, enjoyable games with their friends and relations?" he asked rhetorically, refilling his mug of tea from the pot sitting between him and Danger. "It's not as if they're turning their backs on some kind of emerging crisis—as closely connected as we are with the Weasleys, we would have heard about that, especially given that Kitten and Ron and their brood are helping defend the castle this time around..."

"Even if there were something so secret the Minister didn't know about it yet, it would fall under the purview of the Department of Mysteries, and that would mean Hermione would know about it," Danger agreed. "And if it were so urgent that it had to supersede the War, you know she would have found some way to tell us about it without breaking any oaths of secrecy." She smiled. "Not only a Marauder's daughter, but a Marauder in her own right, and mother to one of the next generation."

"Those four were the only thing which has ever made me think seriously of resigning this post." Remus let his eyes rove down the table which usually seated Gryffindor House until they rested on a pair of thirteen-year-old wizards busily devouring enormous plates of breakfast. "Jacob Beauvoi, Luke Weasley, Nathaniel Potter, and Andy Longbottom. In that order, the Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs of our day. And if I could have showed *them* to the boy I used to be, I think I can guarantee you what he would have fastened onto..."

Danger projected the image of Nate and Andy (currently enjoying their own breakfast with their parents and siblings in the invaders' camp outside Hogwarts's walls), and Remus added the form of his much younger self, eyes wide in surprise as he surveyed the foursome, particularly the one closest to the end, with a head covered in braids whose bright beads would surely have been removed in preparation for today's battle. **Wait—Andy's a girl?**

Is, was, always has been, Danger replied in her own younger-self voice. **Andromeda Theresa Longbottom. And what's wrong with girls anyway?**

Nothing's wrong with girls! It's just... Chuckling, Remus let the images fade. "I had something like this conversation with Sirius last night, and we got to wondering what would have happened if he and Aletha had worked things out earlier than they did," he said. "It might have meant Meghan was born around the same time as Harry, instead of being younger, and that could easily have put *her* in charge of things, as far as the cubs were concerned. But after we got done laughing about that, we started thinking about what else it would have changed."

"Like James and Lily." Danger nodded, able to follow her husband's logic without trouble. "They would have been a lot more hesitant to use Sirius as Secret-Keeper if he'd been married and a father already. So it either still would have been Peter, but openly this time, or it would have been you. And whichever way they chose, a *lot* of things would have changed..." She trailed off, the inevitable conclusion of this conversation occurring to her. "Oh no. He's got a story going along those lines now, doesn't he? Did he think he'd be able to hold the plotbunnies off at least until after the War?"

"Not to be callous, but this time out, he's not our problem. And if he gets distracted by a stray story-thought and happens to get killed a few more times than he ordinarily would..." Remus shrugged. "*C'est la guerre*."

Danger's eyebrows ascended. "And none of this has *anything* to do with that bet you two have had going for as long as there's *been* a Society for Combat Approximation, about who gets killed the least in any particular War, now does it?"

Remus only smiled.