

The Audacity of One Little Hufflepuff

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: This story takes place just after the Christmas Holidays three years before Harry Potter comes to Hogwarts. Thanks to my wonderful beta Nathaniel who made this much more readable than it has ever been. Any mistakes left over are all my doing.

The dungeons blistered with a January wind that moaned through the drafty stonework like another ghost bent to its miserable work. The small, very dark-haired girl pulled her winter cloak further around her, covering her House mark. Despite the additional cold, the girl moved towards the stone walls – hoping to blend in with some of the shadows. The dungeons were not a safe place for a small Hufflepuff to be alone this late in the day.

Despite having Potions class twice a week since the start of term, she was beginning to wonder if she'd taken an incorrect turn. Sometimes the castle walls and corridors seemed to move and shift. It wouldn't be unheard of for someone to lose their way. About to decide that she wasn't up to her appointed task this evening, she saw a light under the Potions classroom door. It appeared the Potions master was in his demesne.

Thinking of the gift her oldest brother had given her, along with the implication that she learn to use it, gave her pause. He was her brother; she should obey him in this. But, really, she had never been any good at it... Only loyalty to Amberton's expectations gave her any courage to do what she had to do. After all, everyone said the Professor was the rightful master in this arena – and he was a Slytherin.

Despite her trepidation, she found herself knocking on the classroom door. The sound echoed for a few seconds before she heard the door scrape open a bare few inches. She slipped inside without waiting for a welcoming word, knowing there wouldn't be one. He was not a welcoming man. She tried not to shuffle her shoes on the flagstones as she closed the door behind her. The back of the room was almost dark, partially lit by the small fire in the front of the room. The Potions master sat at his desk, flipping through a stack of parchment, sneering to himself.

"Either state your business in my classroom this late in the evening or leave. I'm in no mood to answer idiotic questions." The words were softly spoken, but the diction was so clear, the room's acoustics so good, that she could hear each syllable.

"Yes, sir." She walked further up the aisle. Her heart was pounding. She couldn't believe she'd ever talked herself into doing this.

Standing just below his desk, she took a deep breath and started the story she had carefully planned. "You see, sir, my brothers gave me an unexpected Christmas present – a chess set. I don't play chess and they know it. There were also strict instructions that I learn how. They expect me to play them when I came home over summer." She took a deep breath, but it was enough time for him to get a well-placed few words in.

"I have no need of your Christmas list, Miss Stouffards. If that is all..." He gestured back to the door behind her.

"Yes, sir, I know you don't. But they expect me to play them in chess. And I can't play. I've thought about asking someone in my House to teach me, but there isn't anyone there who would be suitable. You see, sir, both of my brothers are, well, quite a bit older than I am." She looked up at him and the disdainful look he wore. "Sylvan, my youngest brother, told me he was a fifth-year when you were a first-year, Professor." That raised his head. Even with the long lifespan of witches that difference in ages was remarkable. She nodded at his look of disbelief. "If I am to learn to play against them, and I have to, I need someone who is of equal experience with them. They both play regularly and have for as long as I can remember."

"And, what does this have to do with me?" His eyes were pulled together, eyebrows raised.

"Everyone says that you are the best chess player in the castle, except for Professor Dumbledore, and I can't find anyone who can really prove that claim. I ought to learn from the best. But Amberton always told me that if you were to play games with anyone, you ought to know their strategies and motivations." She waited for the Potions master to react to that statement. It was a Slytherin concept, not Hufflepuff.

His face was drawn in malicious delight, as if he had just caught someone involved in a heavy-point crime. "That is a well-known edict, Miss Stouffards, but not one he would have learned in Hufflepuff." He quirked his eyebrow at her, as if demanding an explanation.

She smiled slightly. The thought of either Amberton or Sylvan in Hufflepuff was rather funny, but she didn't want to laugh at her Potions professor. "No, sir, they wouldn't. That is another reason I wanted to learn from you." She paused again. This was a little tricky to admit. But he was Slytherin, he would understand. "You see, sir, Sylvan was five years above you, and Amberton was seven. They weren't in Hufflepuff, and would in fact have been rather put out to have been. They were in Slytherin."

This brought up the Potion master's head. She could see his memory working to place her brothers. It didn't take long. "Amberton and Sylvan Connington? I didn't realize they had any other siblings." He stared at her for a long time, trying to put together some puzzle in his mind.

She stood there and waited. Amberton did the same thing so she was somewhat used to it. Slytherin had been a dangerous place to be when her brothers were in school. She knew that they tried to stay out of it – and to a large degree did. But she had no way of knowing how others in the class perceived them.

"Certainly both were Slytherin, but neither well regarded." He paused here again. "However, I do remember that Sylvan Connington played chess rather well, though I never had the opportunity to oppose him." He stared at her for another eternity. "Very well, Miss Stouffards. But this undertaking can be no light effort. If you wish to learn to play Wizard Chess well enough to best a Slytherin, you must put forth quite a bit of effort."

"Hard work is a tenant of my House, Professor." She tried, in vane, to keep the small smile from her expression, knowing that it would anger him.

"Supposedly, Miss Stouffards. I will see you here Thursday evening one hour after dinner. Bring your chess board and be prepared to stay for one hour."

She sighed in relief. He really was the only one capable of teaching her Slytherin tactics. She had been unsure whether or not he would just blast her out of the room, but he would teach her instead.

"I need not tell you, Miss Stouffards, that this is not to be spread among your little friends. I will not have it bandied about the castle that I am giving chess lessons." The only way to describe his face at that moment was stern.

"No, sir," she quickly agreed.

"If any of your little friends question your time here, you were given a detention for sheer audacity and impertinence."

She nodded, almost too afraid to speak, lest he would change his mind. But he turned his attention back to his stack of parchment and said, "If that is all, Miss Stouffards?"

"Yes, sir, until Thursday then. Thank you."

That night was not the last time that she worked up the sheer audacity and impertinence to ask something of the Potions master nor did either realize that they had embarked on a wholly remarkable undertaking. But the rest, as they say, is another story.