

6

Recruitment Session

The first month passed at an astonishing speed. The days were already beginning to shorten. October had settled over Hogwarts Castle. The students hurried back from their Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures classes, trying to avoid the gusts of wind that bit at their faces, which weren't hidden under thick scarves.

"The weather isn't ideal for the selection," Neville remarked, pulling up the collar of his robe.

He turned to Ginny, her fiery red hair being swept by the wind, dressed in her Quidditch gear, as she looked at the short list of candidates to complete her team.

She had found a few members from the previous year. Demelza Robins, the young fourth-year student, had grown quite a bit since the previous summer. She had rushed to find Ginny as soon as her appointment as captain was announced.

Given her determination to join the team again, Ginny hadn't hesitated to include her. She was also pestered by Ritchie Coote and Jimmy Peakes, the Beaters Harry had recruited the previous year.

"Nothing is set in stone yet," she had told them. "Everyone needs a chance to try out for the team."

"But you already told Demelza she was in the team!" Coote protested.

Ginny bit her lip. She probably shouldn't have spoken too soon. She knew Demelza's potential. They had exchanged letters over the summer about the training she was doing every day to improve her game.

Ginny didn't doubt Coote and Peakes' motivation, but she knew their playing skills didn't quite match the finesse of her brothers. The two boys left grumbling, but Ginny wasn't surprised to see them return on the day of the trials.

In front of her, about thirty candidates had shown up to try out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. To help manage the process, Ginny had asked Neville for help organizing everything.

They had divided the candidates based on the positions they were trying out for. A large number of them were very young. Ginny doubted some of their abilities to make the team for that reason.

"Keep an eye on those ones," she told Neville, nodding towards a group of second-years.

Once the last stragglers made their way onto the field, Ginny took a deep breath and stepped forward.

"Welcome, everyone!" she called out in a loud voice. "Today, we'll see who among you can join and represent the Gryffindor team. Some of you played last year, but every position is up for grabs."

She glanced at Coote and Peakes standing side by side, chests puffed out, proud of their previous season.

"And you, Captain, what position are you playing this year?" called out a third-year girl.

The other students moved aside so Ginny could see her. She was a tall, dark-skinned girl for her age, with hair cut very short, almost like fuzz on her head. But it was her bright blue eyes that caught Ginny's attention the most.

"What's your name?" Ginny asked.

"Dalia," the girl said confidently. "Dalia Willow. I'm a third-year."

Ginny nodded.

"Well, Dalia, my position will depend on the needs of the team. You see, last year, I played as a Chaser because that's the position that suits me best."

She paused before continuing.

"When our captain was out of the game, I naturally took his place as Seeker, and we were able to win the cup again."

A murmur of surprise spread through the crowd.

"That's my job as captain: to create the best possible team by selecting the most skilled players for the positions that match their play style, and build a cohesion between them to crush the other teams. Do you understand, Dalia?"

The young girl nodded.

"Do you think you can help me with that?"

Dalia puffed out her chest and nodded again.

Ginny smiled. She didn't know what this young girl was capable of, but she wasn't going to let her out of her sight.

She returned to Neville, who was standing on the edge of the pitch, and whispered something in his ear.

"Forget about the kids. I want you to focus on her."

Neville glanced over at Dalia, who was being teased by other students in a playful manner, and nodded without saying a word.

Ginny returned to the pitch, carrying a large trunk familiar to all Quidditch fans.

"We'll start with the Chaser selection," she announced.

She opened the trunk and released the Quaffle, a large red ball the size of a basketball. With a swift kick, she sent it flying above her head and caught it expertly with one hand.

"I hope you're ready."

She flashed a smile that caught more than a few by surprise. In a second, she called for her broom and jumped onto it without hesitation, soaring more than ten meters into the air.

The fastest candidates quickly mounted their brooms and joined her for a test of speed and agility.

Neville heard someone rushing out of the locker rooms. He turned to see the blonde figure of Seamus hurrying to join the other students.

"What are you doing here?" Neville asked in surprise.

"Well, I'm here for the tryouts," Seamus explained, breathlessly. "I'm late because I was waiting for my new broom to arrive."

He showed off the long, sleek broom with branches as flexible as a paintbrush.

"What kind of broom is that?" Neville asked.

Seamus grinned widely as he showed it to him.

"It's an Outsider 04," he announced. "It's a broom created by two former Irish players who worked on it for years before..."

Seamus was interrupted by Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Mr. Finnigan, kindly put yourself on what you call a broom and join your teammates on the field. You will have plenty of time to chat with Mr. Longbottom after the trials."

Seamus quickly mounted his new broom to the laughter of the crowd and joined the other participants.

Ginny smiled as she saw him arrive. She was reassured to know that their conversation the previous night had sunk in for Seamus.

The night before, as she had lingered in a corner of the common room, she spotted Seamus seated in an armchair by the fire.

Once she finished her homework, she went to join her friend and sat next to him. Lost in thought, Seamus didn't hear her coming and only reacted when she gently grabbed his arm.

"Everything okay?" she asked. "You look worried."

Seamus was holding a letter in his hands.

"It's from Dean," she realized.

Seamus nodded, his eyes fixed on the glowing embers.

"Did something happen to him?" she asked, concerned.

Seamus slowly shook his head.

Unable to wait, Ginny snatched the parchment from his hands and quickly read the message from the boy she had dated the previous year.

Dean wrote that he had been hiding since he left home. He had left a letter for his parents, telling them he was going to Seamus' house before heading back to Hogwarts.

He then went to his uncle's, who lived in a small village far in the west. Some Snatchers tried to get him, but he managed to escape by Disapparating a little further away. He ran into another group of Snatchers but, with the help of a wizard on the run named Ted Tonks, he was able to neutralize them and follow Mr. Tonks in his escape.

Ginny felt reassured by the mention of Tonks' father. She knew Dean was in the company of someone trustworthy.

When she finished reading the letter, she looked up at Seamus, whose eyes were still fixed on the embers, from which small flames occasionally emerged only to disappear moments later, suffocated by the lack of fuel.

"I know you're worried about him," she said softly. "But staying up all night fretting won't help him."

She paused before adding, "Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

She explained what her brothers had done to prevent Harry from falling into the hands of the Death Eaters. She mentioned the sacrifice of Mad-Eye Moody and George's ear, lost to a curse cast by the man the Ministry of Magic had deemed fit to appoint as the head of Hogwarts.

Seamus finally tore his gaze away from the fire. He turned to Ginny, whose eyes were now filled with tears.

"How do you think I feel, waiting for my family to return alive from missions where they could all be killed?"

She wiped away a tear running down her cheek.

"And how do you think I feel when my loved ones risk their lives to save the boy I've loved for years, and I'm left behind because I'm not of age?"

Ginny could no longer hold back her tears.

Embarrassed, Seamus didn't know what to do. He awkwardly patted her back, and the young girl collapsed into his arms.

They stayed like that for a long while, letting her calm down.

"Don't worry, Ginny. We will defend Hogwarts against the Death Eaters. Dumbledore's Army hasn't had its last word."

He wiped a tear from her cheek.

"We're going to honor the memory of our friends and allow them to focus on the mission Dumbledore gave them."

When Seamus joined the circle of those trying out for the Chaser position, Ginny explained the drill the players would be doing.

Each of them would have to make a targeted shot after slaloming through the course Ginny and Neville had set up before they arrived, all while avoiding a Bludger hit by Coote and Peakes, who had been recruited for the exercise.

Seamus waited patiently for his turn among the last to go. The first ten candidates weren't very effective. Most of them could barely fly and didn't even make it through the obstacles placed in front of them.

When Demelza stepped up to do the course, she sped through the obstacles. She dodged a Bludger sent by Coote with a Sloth Grip Roll, an evasive maneuver involving a full spin around the broom before regaining balance. She zoomed past Ginny, who lobbed the Quaffle her way, pointing to the center hoop.

Demelza launched herself off her broom and executed a backward somersault, sending the Quaffle straight through the middle of the hoop before catching herself just in time back on her broom.

When she climbed back onto her broom, the crowd erupted in cheers. Even the other students trying out for the team applauded her loudly.

Ginny, sitting astride her broom, exchanged a delighted look with Neville, who scribbled notes in his notebook.

"I think we've found a strong candidate," Ginny announced to the crowd, which responded with a wave of applause.

Ginny encouraged the remaining participants to give it a shot, but after Demelza's impressive display, several dropped out without trying.

A handful of candidates still gave it a go.

Dalia Willow, the third-year student, took off on her broom, made a few clumsy turns, and dove to avoid the Bludgers before grabbing the Quaffle mid-air. The ball slipped from her hands and almost got away before she caught it again by hanging off her broom. She kept moving toward the hoops and threw the Quaffle through the left ring.

A round of applause followed her feat. She did a victory lap and high-fived one of her friends who had come to cheer her on.

Ginny glanced at Neville, who added the new recruit's name to the list of potential players.

"Next!" Ginny exclaimed.

Three other candidates tried their luck. One managed to avoid the Bludgers but missed the ball. The second caught the ball but took a Bludger to the stomach. The third successfully dodged the Bludgers and caught the Quaffle but scored in the left hoop when Ginny had asked him to aim for the right.

There were some polite applause, a sympathetic exclamation for the second candidate, and slightly more enthusiastic cheers for the last one.

Ginny was about to call the next player when she caught Seamus's eye. She smiled at him and loudly announced:

"Next!"

Seamus shot into the air. He found himself over three meters off the ground and took a moment to fix his eyes on the course ahead. He darted toward the first cone, rounded it, and sped past the second and third without slowing down.

He shot upwards and signaled Ginny for a pass with one hand. She gestured for him to pick up speed and sent the ball flying about ten meters away.

Seamus spotted Peakes from the corner of his eye and pushed his broom to full speed. He saw Coote's blurry figure pass by him, giving a powerful hit to the Bludger sent his way by his partner.

The enchanted ball hurtled toward Seamus like a hunting hawk. He dived to avoid the assault and saw the large red ball getting closer and closer to the ground.

He gave his broom an extra boost and distanced himself from his pursuers to catch the Quaffle in a spectacular fashion.

He hovered just a meter above the ground, jumped off his broom, ran a few steps, and sent the ball bouncing off the edge of the right hoop before it shot through like a rocket.

Seamus skidded to a halt, breathing heavily. He looked around as if he couldn't believe the course he had just completed.

The crowd erupted in cheers that shook the stands. Seamus's performance had been the most impressive anyone had ever seen on this field. The maneuver he had just pulled off had never been performed by anyone before.

Ginny rushed over to him, hugging him and bombarding him with questions.

"How did you do that?! I've never seen any Chaser pull off that kind of move."

Seamus mumbled, embarrassed by Ginny's compliment.

"Well, Dean taught me that. Last year, he taught me how to play football. He said Muggles are used to playing only with their feet, so he advised me to learn how to use mine to get better at Quidditch."

Ginny turned to the crowd and shouted:

"What do you think? Should we add him to the team?"

A roar of approval and thunderous applause shook the stadium.

Seamus couldn't believe it. He had been accepted by the crowd.

Ginny joined in the congratulations for a few minutes, along with the other candidates, before calling for order again.

She didn't even need to look at Neville for him to add Seamus's name to the list of potential players.

The Gryffindor captain got back on her broom and encouraged the last few students to give it a go, but their performances seemed dull compared to Seamus's.

When everyone had had their turn, she announced the start of the exercise for the Beaters.

Seamus took the opportunity to find Neville, who congratulated him with a hearty slap on the back that almost made him stumble.

"You never told me you had that kind of talent!" Neville exclaimed.

Seamus scratched his head, his cheeks red with embarrassment.

"Well, it wasn't exactly planned," he admitted. "Honestly, I kind of reacted on instinct."

They were joined by An, who also congratulated Seamus.

"I've seen a lot of acrobatics in my time, but that one was really impressive," he said.

Seamus thanked them both and slipped away to rejoin the team, who showered him with more back slaps, cheers, and questions about his broom, which no one had ever seen before.

In the crowd, students from various houses had gathered to watch the formation of the new Gryffindor team. Some students from other houses had slipped into the audience as well.

Certain students, like Attilius Malkin, watched with curiosity. What fascinated him most wasn't the feats of the various candidates but the passion that animated the supporters with each new attempt.

"Are you here to watch them too?" a voice asked.

He turned and saw the tall, slender figure of Blaise, who came to sit beside him.

"Do they have any good recruits?" Blaise asked.

Attilius shrugged.

"A few," he admitted. "But I don't think their captain is too convinced by this new batch."

He glanced at Ginny, whose tense figure stood with her cape flapping in the wind like a Gryffindor House flag.

"I have a feeling this year won't be too difficult," Blaise snickered, nodding toward the new recruits struggling to stay on their brooms.

Attilius remained silent for a few moments. His gaze shifted from Ginny to Neville, who was sitting just beyond the edge of the pitch.

"I think some of them might still surprise us..."

In about ten minutes, the Beaters had also finished their tests.

Ginny had set up four iron posts around which the candidates had to maneuver. Their task was simple: be the last one still on their broom.

Two candidates stood out in this exercise. Coote and Peakes were far more skilled than the other applicants. Surprisingly, they had teamed up to eliminate all their competitors.

Ginny praised their performance.

They rejoined the other candidates to observe the goalkeepers and Seekers, but none seemed to please Ginny.

As the sun began to set, Professor McGonagall ended the selection session, much to Ginny's dismay. She spent about ten minutes following the Gryffindor headmistress, pleading with her to let her give some candidates another chance.

"Miss Weasley!" McGonagall exclaimed. "Do not make a spectacle of yourself. You had the whole day to test your candidates. The headmaster cannot grant you more time. Please gather your things and return to the castle without delay."

With that, she left Ginny behind and walked up the hill, accompanied by the last few students who had come to watch the selection.

Ginny angrily kicked a stone, sending it flying.

Neville, who had just made all the equipment disappear with a flick of his wand, joined her, the list of candidates tucked under his arm.

"I thought we'd have more trouble putting together a decent team, but I feel like most of our recruits are talented."

Ginny said nothing, her jaw clenched. Professor McGonagall hadn't even bothered to listen to her.

"Is something wrong?" Neville asked.

Unable to hold it in any longer, Ginny burst into tears.

"Everything's wrong, Neville! All our friends are gone. My family is in constant danger. My brother and boyfriend are missing, and I don't know where they are, probably being hunted down by Voldemort's forces."

Ignoring Neville's horrified expression, she continued.

"And I couldn't help them. My brother lost an ear. Now I'm the captain of the Gryffindor team, which I've always dreamed of, but I can't even put together a decent team."

Neville, unsure of how to comfort her, hesitantly stepped closer and awkwardly hugged her.

She collapsed into his arms while he clumsily patted her back.

"I'm sure everything will work out," he reassured her. "We've gotten through worse times."

She pushed him away and met his gaze.

"You don't understand. McGonagall told me that scouts from various teams will be attending the matches to look for new recruits."

Neville paused to take in the information.

"You want to be recruited?"

She nodded.

"I've always dreamed of joining the Holyhead Harpies," she admitted.

Neville nodded in understanding but said nothing. Although he had no talent for Quidditch himself, he had always supported the Gryffindor team. He regretted not being able to attend the World Cup three years earlier.

"I'm sure we'll end up with a good team," he said, trying to be optimistic.

He stepped away for a moment to show her his list.

"We've got three Chasers who look very promising, two Beaters who already know how to work as a duo, and a very talented Seeker."

He winked at her, making her laugh.

"And..."

"No decent Keeper," she finished.

Neville reviewed the list of candidates for the missing position, not particularly convinced by what he saw.

"You're right, the Keeper candidates are less than impressive," he admitted.

He scanned the list one more time.

"Kensington, maybe?" he suggested.

"Not credible," Ginny responded.

"Al-Mayed?" he continued.

"She's hopeless."

"McDonald?"

Ginny stared at him.

"Are you kidding? He got hit in the face with the Quaffle."

Neville burst out laughing.

"Well, it counts as a save, doesn't it?"

She gave him a surprised look, trying to figure out if he was joking or serious.

"You're not serious, are you?" She pleaded.

Neville shrugged. It was that or nothing. They had to make do with the candidates they had, and this year... the prospects weren't great.

"Let's just focus on offense," she sighed. "That should help us avoid getting crushed."

Neville patted her on the back.

"You just need to catch the Snitch as soon as you see it."

Ginny nodded, exhausted from the long day. She no longer had the energy to fight. All she wanted was to return to the castle and go to bed.

She headed for the showers, while Neville made his way up the hill toward the main entrance.

On the way, he passed a group of Slytherins who pointed at him and laughed.

Used to such childish remarks, Neville paid them no mind and continued toward the Great Hall.

He slumped down next to Seamus, who was devouring a large slice of chicken pie.

Grabbing a ladle, Neville helped himself to a generous portion of soup that smelled delicious.

A few moments later, they were joined by Ginny, whose face still showed her deep frustration.

"Have you made up your mind about the new recruits?" Seamus asked eagerly.

Ginny shot him a venomous look, and he quickly realized it was best not to push the subject.

They finished their dinner in silence and went to bed without further conversation.

The next morning, Neville found Ginny at the breakfast table. From her gloomy expression, he understood that her mood hadn't improved since the previous day.

"How long do you have before you need to announce the final lineup for the team?" he asked.

"I have to give it to Professor McGonagall by the end of the day."

Neville nodded silently. His plan to find a new player was somewhat compromised.

He looked around and tried to recruit based on the physical appearance of the Gryffindors sitting along the table.

"Yeah, it's going to be a bit tricky," he noted.

Ginny didn't respond. She barely lifted her eyes from her bowl of cereal when Seamus and An joined them, all smiles.

"What's got you two in such a good mood?" Neville asked.

An told him that the first trip to Hogsmeade was scheduled for the following week.

"Finally, some good news," he agreed.

He turned to Ginny, who still had her eyes fixed on her bowl.

"Come on," he urged her. "It'll be a good distraction."

She shrugged, not convinced.

They finished their breakfast and took advantage of the timid October sunshine flooding the grounds to relax on the grass near the lake.

The boys had brought their homework, which had piled up over the course of the week.

Professors Flitwick and McGonagall had respectively assigned them sixty centimeters of parchment on Vanishing Charms and fifty centimeters on physical transfiguration.

Although excused from Transfiguration since the previous year, Neville had joined advanced Herbology classes with a few Hufflepuffs.

Professor Sprout had assigned them a detailed plan on the composition of Cocchryns and their virtues.

The plant had long, whip-like branches that snapped around it to ward off anyone trying to approach its core.

Meanwhile, Ginny was amusing herself by tossing a stone into the air and expertly catching it.

A little further away, a group of Slytherins were teasing a Gryffindor boy, who was doing his best to ignore them.

He was sitting by the lake, tossing bits of bread to the giant squid. The bread would float on the surface for a few seconds before being devoured.

The Slytherins had recognized the boy from the Quidditch trials and were mocking him relentlessly.

Ginny, alerted by the taunting voices, stood up and recognized Elliott Kelly, one of the boys who had tried out for keeper.

She was about to intervene when someone beat her to it.

A gust of wind brushed past her head, and a stone struck the nose of a large, burly Slytherin who was leading the group.

He lost his balance and fell into one of his companions, who caught him with difficulty.

A tall, athletic boy passed Ginny's group and placed himself between Elliott and the Slytherins.

"Does it amuse you to gang up on someone weaker than you?!" he growled. "Five against one? Real brave."

Seeing their shocked expressions, he continued.

"Oh, right, of course. That's exactly what Slytherins are known for. Ganging up on unarmed opponents like Death Eaters, huh?"

"He's lost his mind!" exclaimed Neville, who had just looked up from his homework. "He's going to get himself killed."

Ginny didn't respond. She watched the situation closely, her hand gripping her wand, ready to step in.

"Who do you think you are?" the leader stammered, pinching his nose to stop the bleeding.

"Let it go, it's Garrett Williams," one of the girls in the group said. "He's just showing off because his parents are big shots at the Ministry."

The boy who had been hit by the stone stood up, furious.

"I don't care if your parents work for the Ministry or even if they're in the Minister's good books. I'm going to make you regret messing with me."

Garrett smiled. He cracked his knuckles and locked eyes with his adversary.

"Whenever you're ready, big guy."

The Slytherin hurled a stone at him with all his might, aiming straight between Garrett's eyes.

Garrett raised his hand and caught the projectile with ease.

Everyone was stunned by the feat. He had stopped it from hitting him at an incredibly close distance.

"That's impossible..." Ginny muttered, a smile creeping across her face. "It's him."

She turned to Neville, who looked dubious at seeing her almost eerie smile.

"It's him!" she repeated. "He's the one we need."

The group of Slytherins threw more projectiles, but Garrett blocked them effortlessly.

Eventually, one of them drew his wand and pointed it at Garrett's chest.

Ginny sprang into action like a cat. She whipped out her own wand and disarmed the boy without difficulty.

Seeing the Gryffindors, the Slytherins bolted, fleeing as fast as they could.

Ginny stowed her wand back in her robe and rushed over to the two boys. Elliott hadn't said a word during the entire exchange, hiding behind his friend's imposing figure.

"You guys okay?" she asked.

Garrett recognized her and smiled.

“No problem. I’m used to dealing with Steven and his little gang.”

The three boys joined them, busy packing up their things.

“You were incredible,” she blurted out. “How did you stop all those stones at such a close range?”

Garrett explained that his parents were Quidditch enthusiasts and that his father had trained him in all positions.

“But I must admit, I have a soft spot for the keeper position,” he said. “I like the idea of defending my team and stopping the opposing side from scoring.”

“Why didn’t you come to the tryouts?” she asked, surprised.

“He was in detention,” Elliott answered in his stead. “That’s why I went in his place. I promised him we’d join the team together.”

Ginny raised her eyebrows.

“Both of you as keepers?”

Elliott shrugged.

“The idea was for the better player to make the team.”

Ginny frowned.

“And... Why didn’t I see you last year? Or the year before?”

“I have a slight problem with authority,” he admitted. “The past two years, I was sent to the kitchens. I couldn’t join the team. But this year, I want to help Gryffindor win.”

Ginny rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

“Do you have a broom?” she asked him.

Garrett nodded, grinning.

Neville interjected.

“Ginny, you can’t be serious?”

“We don’t have a choice, Neville. None of the other recruits are good enough for the position. No offense, Elliott.”

The boy raised his hand to reassure her.

Ginny grabbed Garrett by the shoulders and looked him straight in the eye.

“Garrett, do you want to join the Gryffindor team as keeper?”

The young boy didn't need time to think. He nodded eagerly, his smile widening.

"I'd love to."

Ginny jumped for joy and hugged him tightly, tears welling up in her eyes.

She apologized to Elliott, who assured her he felt no jealousy towards his friend. He was more than happy to see Garrett join the Gryffindor team.

Ginny wiped the tears from her cheeks and turned to Seamus, announcing proudly,

"That's it, I've decided who's going to make up our Quidditch team."