**Chapter 71**

**Forgotten Preliminaries**

**19 March 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Romanov won handily the first two Durmstrang preliminaries.”

Alexandra didn’t raise an eyebrow in surprise or even experience an increase in her heart rate. This was anything but good news, but it was definitely not unexpected.

“Go on, I’m sure there is more bad news revealed on this page,” the Basilisk-Slayer told Lyre, who was reading the German newspaper’s special edition on the European Magical Tournament.

“Apparently, the Dark Queen of Russia got full marks each time. During the second, she sent five boys to the hospital. Each time this Champion was reported to have used extremely potent Dark Magic. The journalists say the aura of power Romanov unleashes when she starts the trial is so potent most living creatures are fleeing her presence.”

That should be what some of the history books called ‘chaotic aura’. The deadlier a Champion of Chaos was, the more it could spread fear, anger, madness, and other damaging emotions in a vast area around him or her. If the newspaper could be trusted, Romanov had chosen fear for the preliminaries. And the Russian witch, as much as it was possible to estimate something so nebulous, was wielding this power wandlessly and without effort.

It wasn’t good. It wasn’t good at all.

“Who are the other three top Champions should the rankings stay like this?” The Potter Heiress asked the Slytherin second-year. It was unlikely, as unlike Hogwarts, Durmstrang had chosen to organise five preliminaries for the European Magical Tournament. But it wasn’t impossible.

“The second place is occupied by the new Bulgarian Seeker Viktor Krum, certainly because he was able to use his broom to devastating effect during the second preliminary. Third is Heinz Munster, a scion of a wealthy German family. Fourth is Karl Schumacher, I’ve never heard of him or someone having his family’s name before...certainly a rising new blood in the middle-classes. But the rankings could change very quickly. The gaps between third and tenth place are so small they might as well not exist.”

These sentences alone were sufficient to reveal how badly Hogwarts was outclassed. The four potential Champions were respectively Russian, Bulgarian, German, and Bavarian. In comparison, the school they were currently into had ‘only’ the British Isles to accept young children from.

“And we still don’t know the Dark Arts’ specialty of the Dark Queen,” Alexandra commented. “Not that I’m surprised by this.”

As the girl who might one day become the new Tsarina of Magical Russia had left all her potential challengers in the dust, it wasn’t like it was necessary to reveal her hidden strengths.

“Yes, she’s so powerful she doesn’t have to get serious,” Morag confirmed. “Personally, I think the Dark Queen is a Necromancer. Chaos is not a Power which will stop you from creating Inferi.”

The part of her lungs and heart infused with hydra hissed in disgust at the mere mention of Necromancy. Fortunately, for the moment it was just a hypothesis. Lyudmila Romanov had shown nothing but a few Dark Curses and her chaotic aura.

“Beauxbatons?”

Lyre turned another page and showed her a large picture of a witch the Morrigan’s Champion had every reason to hate. “Fleur Delacour is in the lead, and barring a catastrophe in their next preliminaries, she should win the French selections.”

“Awesome.” If they all competed at the same time, there was one opponent who was going to go after her no matter what she did. “And if I kill this Light Champion in front of thousands of spectators, travelling legally into French territory is going to be...complicated.”

“The good news is that for the moment, Delacour is unpopular,” Lyre pointed out, generating a mild expression of interest from the raven-haired Ravenclaw.

“Your sources?”

The French-born Slytherin nodded.

“It’s not exactly a secret the daughter of the French Minister has lot of enemies inside and outside Beauxbatons.”

“Because she’s a Veela hybrid and a Light Champion, or because her father is the French Minister?” Morag grinned.

“Because Fleur Delacour is a narcissist bitch and tends to treat everyone like they’re unworthy of licking her shoes,” Lyre told them tartly. “France is far more tolerant than Britain where mixed blood and crossbreeding is concerned, but the contacts I have at Beauxbatons have only good things to say about the younger sister...Gabrielle, I believe. I don’t think the Light Champion issue is influencing the school opinion; most people aren’t aware of it.”

“All right.” Something to keep in mind for the future; just because Fleur Delacour loathed her and was sure to do her best to kill her didn’t mean the rest of the Delacour family was full of bad apples. “What about the rest of the competitors?”

“There are three boys who have managed to seize a good advance in their first preliminaries, though there are two girls right behind who still have a chance to dethrone them,” Lyre returned to something approaching a teacher’s tone. “Henri de Condé is probably the most dangerous; his family is noted to produce incredibly powerful wizards, and since the Grindelwald War, they have the best claim to the throne.”

“I don’t think your people are eager to reinstate the royalty, Lyre,” Morag told her. “Not after what Grindelwald did to the last crowned head of the Bourbons and his immediate family.”

The Dark Lord their Headmaster had ultimately slain during the Battle of Hogsmeade had left nothing to chance. Once the King of France had been slaughtered in a terrifyingly short and brutal duel, most of the royal family had been massacred. Then the Dark Lord’s elite killers had proceeded to hunt and murder each and every one of the claimants who would have been unquestionably recognised as the new head of state.

Something that, in 1945 once the war entered in its last stage, had resulted in the surviving families of the French resistance – where the name Condé had played a major role – finding and organising the executions of over two hundred German and Prussian wizards who had served at one time or another under Grindelwald’s banner. Coupled with the casualties taken on multiple fronts, the destruction of Dresden – which according to several rumours, Rincewind had been paid by the French Resistance to burn to the ground - and many, many massacres, the army which had conquered Europe had been almost wiped out, and the survivors had been imprisoned in Nurmengard with their master.

“Okay, Condé will be placed in the category ‘dangerous’,” Lyudmila Romanov was in the ‘very dangerous’, obviously. “Who are the other two?”

“The third, much like Schumacher, is a big unknown. His name is Lucas Gauthier, and according to the newspaper, he’s a Muggle-born. I have literally nothing on him save that he used a lot of Transfiguration and Charms during the first preliminary. The fourth is Armand Coularé de Lafontaine. This is not an important family, and they’ve had many financial problems in the past.”

“Do you know if there are potential Champions among them?” the Irish redhead intervened.

“I don’t,” the future Male-Foi Lady said regretfully. “It’s not like there are a lot of guaranteed methods if you aren’t caught communing with your Power on a Sabbat night. The most efficient way to see if someone is a Champion is to have another Champion meet him or her. But since I doubt we will have an opportunity to go to Beauxbatons...”

“There’s still the Quidditch World Cup this summer,” Morag reminded the blonde.

Alexandra chuckled.

“Morag, come on, let’s be serious. The diplomatic relations between France and Britain are...execrable, and each month it is getting worse. The only French who will come to the World Cup will be the French team and the die-hard fans. Fleur Delacour and Henri de Condé come from sufficiently prestigious and important families that they aren’t going to waste a Portkey unless France is in a position to win the Cup.”

“Gauthier may come,” Lyre agreed with her words. “The three others certainly won’t, however. So the first time you will meet the Beauxbatons will likely be the opening ceremony of the European Magical Tournament.”

Practically, it meant that it would be far too late to do anything but mitigate the damage.

“And we still don’t have any idea what the Italians and Venetians are doing, of course,” the Slytherin girl finished. “Their names and basic information are available. That’s all.”

Of course, this was because the Scuola Regina’s preliminaries were all scheduled between mid-April and late June. Nobody at Hogwarts or in Britain knew exactly the reason why. Maybe they wanted to test the new infrastructures in summer conditions with tourists and judges before the other schools arrived?

Still, there were a few students that promised trouble no matter if they were selected or not. Lorenzo de Medici and Eleonora de Riva were of famous Light lineages. Lucrezia Sforza was, according to Lady Zabini, the daughter of the Headmistress. So she was potentially an agent of the Exchequer, a Dark Champion, and a Succubus all in the same body for the upcoming Tournament. And there was also Romeo Malatasti, from a family known to have sired particularly Dark mercenaries for the last three or four hundred years.

If someone told her the Scuola Regina was going to be the weakest of the four schools present, Alexandra had some empty terrain at the bottom of Scapa Flow to sell to him or her.

“We will have to wait and see, like a lot of important things,” Morag concluded unhappily. “And we will probably have to do our utmost best to not show anything new during the last preliminary.”

“The last preliminary which will take place the day of Beltane, by some strange coincidence,” Alexandra sarcastically told the other two witches. “Seriously, I realise Dumbledore is doing his best to erase all the ancient traditions, but this is just stupid.”

“It was Bagman’s idea, or so my parents heard.”

The Potter Heiress shrugged after assimilating this piece of information.

“It may be Bagman’s idea, but our esteemed Headmaster has done nothing to block it or find a less dangerous date.”

Beltane marked the end of the dark season – winter – and celebrated in return the beginning of the light days. It was a Sabbat Day and Night, and it was traditionally a holy day where violence and feuds were prohibited. The druids protected livestock and the rest of their villages and lands, when they existed, in addition to the ignition of the sacred fire and many other blessings for the harvests and the last days of spring and the numerous days of summer.

“Assuming blood isn’t shed and no one commits a blasphemy against the Dark Powers this day, the consequences should be limited.”

Alexandra would have found Morag’s remark somewhat comforting if she didn’t know there were hundreds of wizards in Britain who had de facto angered entities like the Morrigan by refusing to participate in the ancient rites, breaking oaths, and disrespecting the very nature of magic most of the times they cast a spell.

“But if blood is shed, it will be better to abandon your idea of a ritual for that night, Alexandra,” the MacDougal Heiress continued.

“Out of the question,” the green-eyed Ravenclaw replied. “You know I need the blessings of Beltane to cast something that might serve as a limited form of Fidelius if we want to avoid problems on the Scylla front. And I also want to know if my cousin is still alive, and if the answer is positive, where he is. I don’t know if performing the traditional protection rite will allow me to receive much from my connection with the Morrigan, but I can’t wait for Samhain...”

There were too many things unravelling to wait six more months. Lockhart was still missing and even the American newspapers had been forced to publish there had been very suspicious murders in some of their governmental buildings at New York, Washington D.C. and other undisclosed locations.

Not to mention there were rumours of former Death Eaters slowly becoming more active. A few whispers pretended they were going to rally to Bellatrix Black. Others murmured the lieutenants of Voldemort wanted to move against her. The European newspapers were filled with incidents of skinchangers and were-people going mad.

Something important was approaching, and whatever it was, it was going to be *bad*.

“I will remind you, there are always are Ministry Hit-Wizards and people drunk with Dumbledore’s ideas who are out these nights. If they find you, they will try to stop you.”

“I’d love to see them try.”

Beltane was not Samhain, but attacking a Champion of the Morrigan in a blessed circle of stones when Light and Dark enforced neutrality...well, there were far more pleasant ways to die. Even for the Army of Light or other potential enemies like the Exchequer, acting during a Beltane ceremony was asking for six years of misfortune, disasters, and a lot of projects meeting a disastrous end. “But they would have to find me first anyway. I’m not going to dance on the stones of Stonehenge, thank you very much. The sites in Southern Ireland you gave me will be sufficient for my purposes.”

“Do remember, some idiots attacked during Samhain,” her Ravenclaw friend said slowly. “I agree it would be a very stupid thing for anyone to come disrupt your respect and protection rituals, amongst other things. Unfortunately, there are people out there who are *that* stupid. If they find you and you’re forced to fight your way out...”

To be sure, it was not something to dismiss out of hand.

“In that case, I will prepare some contingencies...the explosive kind.”

And so the next hours were spent imagining crazy plans. Plans so ridiculous most would undoubtedly be discarded tomorrow after they had re-read them a third or a fourth time just for a laugh.

But that was all right. There was still time until May. And maybe, just maybe, the people who wanted her dead for the sole reason of existing would realise at last trying to kill her was a self-fulfilling doom prophecy...

**26 March 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

Many times in the last weeks, Alexandra had been very glad she had left Tisiphone in Ireland. It wasn’t because the giant bat was carnivorous or had poor manners.

It was just that at the moment, Atalanta and Fingolfin were glaring and circling around on the grass like they were measuring each other’s prowess before a duel. The mistress of the two flying hellions didn’t want to think what would happen if there was a third large participant thrown into this contest.

It would certainly be amusing at first...until time came to separate them at least.

Of course at this very moment, it was not one snowy owl against one Britannian gold. Atalanta had come from the owlery with three of her babies, and the owlets had already grown to a respectable size.

It was a good thing for Atalanta, because while the snowy owl tried to appear bigger than Alexandra’s young dragon, it wasn’t very successful. Fingolfin was continuously increasing in size, and the smoke created by its nostrils was intimidating, even if you knew the fire breath wasn’t available.

“I think it’s not going to be easy making them accept Tisiphone,” the green-eyed girl voiced her doubts to her guardian, who was also observing the spectacle provided by the two ‘challengers’ on her lawn.

The South American-born bat, after all, was far from a small and inoffensive representative of the different species sharing the name.

“If you think this is going to cause cohabitation problems between your pets, I fear they are going to get worse,” the smile on Lady Zabini’s face gave Alexandra bad vibes.

After a few seconds of hesitation, Alexandra asked the dreaded question.

“All right. How can the problems of cooperation get worse?”

“It was a tradition centuries ago when magical inter-school tournaments were organised regularly that the winner of a task-trial was given an exotic animal in reward...amongst many other things.”

Alexandra opened her mouth...before closing it again without saying a word, in order to hide her surprise and the groan-like sound which would have unavoidably come out.

“Hermione did mention some animals being offered as presents, but I didn’t think they were part of a tradition,” she stated as one owlet tried to walk on Fingolfin’s tail, since the dragon was distracted by his ‘glare duel’ with Atalanta. “But I didn’t pay it too much attention, to be honest.”

Frankly, Alexandra wasn’t so arrogant to think about victory, no matter what delusions Dumbledore, Bagman, and their friends had been under for months. The first step was surviving each task of the European Magical Tournament, in perfect health at best, with all her limbs and internal organs where they were supposed to be and no Dark magic’s wounds at worse.

“Besides, I suppose it isn’t like we can choose the rewards or the prizes,” the young Ravenclaw continued in a semi-interrogative voice.

“You can’t,” her magical guardian confirmed quickly. “But let’s face the positive side of things: House Sforza has a worldwide network of agents at its disposal and the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina is hosting the Tournament to awe the entire population of Europe. I rather doubt the rewards won’t be impressive and exotic.”

“My joy is limitless.” Digging into her memory, Alexandra winced as she remembered there had been one Tri-Wizard Tournament where a Beauxbatons judge, frustrated by the exploits of a Durmstrang champion, had conspired and used a lot of his resources to offer a white elephant to said teenage wizard, thereby forcing the winner to spend a lot of money on his new large ‘companion’. Yes, in hindsight the tradition of offering exotic animals in these tournaments made far more sense than it should.

She would have to hope it wasn’t something horribly embarrassing, horribly dangerous, or extremely illegal by the letter of British law...like a Basilisk.

“You may have to think about a great menagerie for the new Potter Manor,” Stella Zabini advised her before returning to the subject they were debating before Atalanta’s arrival. Said snowy owl’s, incidentally, had taken refuge in a tree with her owlets. This position wouldn’t be safe for long, as Fingolfin was trying to reach them with a series of long jumps and hazardous flying. “Have you thought about Cassiopeia Black’s will?

“Yes, Stella,” the Potter Heiress replied. “As much as I don’t like Dumbledore at all, I am really not eager to support Narcissa Malfoy here and now. I mean, the Headmaster is sure to be an enemy for years to come, but the Malfoys are not my friends either.”

The Lord and Lady Malfoy may be eager to present a ‘respectable’ face to the world, but the fact remained their hands had been dirtied with the blood of hundreds and maybe thousands during the previous civil war. There was little doubt that Lucius Malfoy, at least, was a senior Death Eater. And their son was a bigot. Draco Malfoy had finally learned to shut his mouth in public, but it was impossible to forget a couple of years of insults and racist slurs.

“I don’t want to intervene in this. Besides, it’s not like Narcissa Malfoy really needs my help. All I have to do is...nothing. As long as I don’t declare Dumbledore was right in sealing the will, House Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore can fight each other in a courtroom and the newspapers.”

“Correct,” the Black Widow said. “However, I will point out it is in your best interest for the will to be unsealed. Albus Dumbledore’s political career aside, Sirius Black is also in a potentially disastrous situation.”

“Disastrous?” Alexandra repeated a bit dubitatively. “Two thirds of House Slytherin and large numbers of Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, and Gryffindors knew the Lord Black and Cassiopeia of Black Cobra Manor hadn’t one thing in common aside from the family’s name. And frankly, what’s the worst that can happen to Sirius Black? I think it’s a heavy fine, no? The Wizengamot isn’t going to send him to Azkaban, or force him to relinquish his seat. It’s not a precedent the hereditary members want to create.”

The more Alexandra learned about it, the more she was convinced the law of Magical Britain consisted of ‘obeying whatever the Minister and the Wizengamot pass by a majority vote’. And since you needed large majorities to remove said laws from being applied, the result was a less-than-efficient system.

“There are rituals and opportunities opened to people when the opposing side has a Lord who doesn’t respect his oaths,” the red-robed Lamia spoke noncommittally.

Alexandra shook her head vigorously.

“I’m not going to open this door, Stella.”

In the long-term, it was probably unavoidable that she was going to use Dark Magic for her own purposes. The green-eyed Ravenclaw was, evidently, a Champion of the Morrigan. But that didn’t mean she was going to begin Dark Rituals just because Lord Sirius Black was a big hypocrite and couldn’t be held to his word. Letting him be fined for his mistakes was already punishment enough.

“I was not referring to you,” the Head of the British Zabini branch said neutrally. “Certain of my associates have confirmed Bellatrix Black is back on British soil.”

Alexandra instantly winced. This was not the kind of news she wanted to hear.

“It’s...it’s interesting,” the Basilisk-Slayer said. “But it gives me even more incentive to not get involved. Whether this Death Eater wants to usurp control of House Black or do something more explosive, I want to be far away from her when it unfolds.”

Bellatrix Black was a Dark Witch that the Potter Heiress had absolutely no wish to be associated with, whether she was in the ascendant politically or not. Dumbledore was a destroyer of traditions and an old manipulative bastard, but he might as well be an angel compared to the bloodbaths the psychopathic ‘Bellatrix Lestrange’ had instigated during her infamous Death Eater career.

“I don’t want to be involved in this mess. Let them fight each other.”

Leo Black and his friends would return to their favourite activity of ambushing Slytherins with hexes and pranks, and her friends would be safe from the aftershocks of this affair.

“I respect your decision. My lawyers may feel somewhat disappointed, but they will watch on the sidelines,” the Black Widow assured her before speaking about more neutral political issues. “For the next Wizengamot session, the DMLE wants to enlarge the list of Class-E artefacts. The principle...”

**28 March 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“And thus it has been decided,” finished the presiding Oliver Wood in a funeral voice, “that this preliminary will from now on be referred to as ‘the Preliminary-which-must-be-forgotten’. The very memories of this disaster will be sealed out of mind and out of our hearts. In Godric’s name, swear it.”

“In Godric’s name, we swear to never mention the Preliminary-which-must-be-forgotten,” Neville spoke with the rest of Gryffindor House. There was of course no magic binding them as no one had a magic wand in hand, but the Boy-Who-Lived had no doubt this oath would be respected.

Everybody present in the Common Room, save maybe Fred and George, had excellent reasons to forget the humiliation they had received thanks to Snape and Whitehead.

Deep inside, Neville felt the urge to strangle the two Potion Masters. It was bad enough they sabotaged him and most of his class when they went to the dungeons, but the dungeon bat and his accomplice weren’t able to stop there, were they? They had to degrade them further, give them a preliminary impossible to do in four hours if you hadn’t been given a clue beforehand.

Neither the ‘Chief Bookworm’ Hermione Granger nor the ‘Exiled Queen’ Alexandra Potter had been able to brew Potions able to crack the Red Boxes in four hours. So they knew the preliminary had about zero chance of being successfully completed.

“And thus in first place ex-aequo we have Fred and George, with eighty-eight points.” The Twins stood and saluted lengthily the assembly with increasingly ridiculous gestures, and Fred tried to steal a kiss from Angelina a few seconds later. “In third place we have our inestimable Angelina with sixty-eight points.” The oldest Chaser just gave a curt nod, too busy hexing the nearest Weasley who was bowing repeatedly in front of her. “Neville is fourth at forty-eight points, and Geoffrey is fifth with three points less.”

Knowing he was still technically qualified was perhaps the best point of the post-preliminary situation...or the worst, the future Longbottom Lord wasn’t sure. On the one hand, he was competing with students far older than he and he was ahead of them in points. On the other hand, it was obvious House Gryffindor was far from leading the pack of Champions, and if Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, or the Scuola Regina had students more powerful than Diggory and Potter, they were completely and utterly screwed.

“Sixth, we have Alicia, thirty-seven points. Seventh, Kenneth, with thirty-four points. Leo is ninth with twenty-one points, and Ronald is tenth with fifteen.”

Yes, at the risk of repeating himself, it wasn’t good at all. The scores might be somewhat impressive at first sight, until everyone remembered there were twenty-four Gryffindors participating in this preliminary, but only ten had managed to earn at least one point. The others were still stuck at zero. And even for those who had scored – like Neville himself – they had to remember the maximum of points awarded was two hundred for the preliminaries they had not done so well in.

And since there were still two other preliminaries and two hundred points available in theory, nothing was truly decided.

“The good news is that we finally have a date for the trial of water that we will have to compete in with the Badgers,” Geoffrey Hooper stated. “It will take place in five days, though we have no idea where. There are tents and wizards from the Department of Games, but they are close to the grounds’ entrance, not near the Black Lake.”

“And Professor Flitwick laughed maniacally when we asked him if he had an idea what the next task was about,” Alicia intervened with an expression of displeasure on her face. “I don’t know what he has been preparing for us, but it can’t be good.”

The majority of the Gryffindors looked at each other with worried expressions. The small Charms Professor was considered by and large one of the nicest teachers, if not the nicest, by hundreds of students. But if he decided to give them something nastier than Snape had prepared...

“Come on, Flitwick has no reason to be vindictive!” Cormac McLaggen protested.

“You tried to attack Potter at the beginning of the Temple of Plants, McLaggen,” Katie reminded the blonde braggart in a low tone. “And in the Unmentionable Preliminary, we tried to shamelessly copy the work of the Ravenclaws if they were close to us. I don’t think he has any reasons to be fond of us at the moment.”

“And the Ravenclaws aren’t with us,” Kenneth stated. “No need to give any clues or reveal a secret trick to anyone. This trial will be fair...for all the good it will do us.”

There were many whispers and murmurs approving the last sentences, and for good reason. To their best knowledge, each Head of House had given a neat advantage to his House before the preliminary he or she had prepared was given to the public. Professor Sprout had taught plenty of insecticide spells to her Badgers the week before the Temple of Plants, and Snake had outright taught several Snakes what they had to do to remove the Alchemic-based protection. It was a bit iffier for Flitwick and the Black Lake, because all Ravenclaws had used different skills and tactics, but they had to have known beforehand to earn the scores they received.

“I wish McGonagall would give us an advantage for the fourth preliminary,” Seamus said, his short hair a reminder of the last explosion which had sent him to the infirmary for two days.

That, unfortunately, wasn’t a given. Their Head of House was a big believer in fairness, equity, and giving no advantage besides what you earned with hard work and completing assignments in time.

“We just have to hope the Subject-which-must-not-be-mentioned will not be involved again...”

“By Merlin, Morgana, and the soul of our Founder, let us pray so!” Fred and George had conjured red robes with large hoods while no one was paying attention, and the sweets and the rest of the food they levitated brought this Tournament debate to an end.

**30 March 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“I have the analysis you wanted me to do, Alex.”

It said quite something that upon hearing Hermione’s voice, Alexandra remorselessly abandoned the complicated Arithmancy diagrams she was working upon, despite knowing the news was unlikely to be good. As much as she tried to improve her knowledge of non-magical mathematics via Piers and Malcolm, the fact remained that Professor Vector’s class was horribly complicated.

The only – meagre – consolation was that this opinion was shared by everyone taking this elective.

“Okay.” Sure enough, when the dark-haired Ravenclaw raised her head, her friend was not smiling. “How bad is it?”

“You’d better hope the tasks of the European Magical Tournament are like our first two preliminaries or some sort of monster-fighting trials,” the older bushy-haired girl answered back. “Or failing that, you will have to know what the task consists of beforehand. We are third-years; we simply don’t know enough compared to the students of Beauxbatons or Durmstrang to obtain the top scores.”

The Potter Heiress didn’t even bother looking surprised. The more the date of the Tournament approached, the more her friends and she realised how out of their league they were. As unpleasant as it was to acknowledge it, Alexandra’s chances of survival lay in the reality that her magical core was largely big enough to be considered Lady-level now and her rising mental aptitude to wield the Hydra Animagus’ transformation.

As gifted as they were for third-years, there was really no hope of filling the gap with someone who had four more years of education and assimilated magical knowledge long before coming to school. Worse, the students of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang – and certainly the Scuola Regina too – hadn’t had their education sabotaged by Dumbledore’s short-sighted moves.

“That bad...are there motives of satisfactions?”

“If we practise fourth and fifth-year spells in our free time, I’m sure we will be able to not look too ridiculous in Transfiguration and Charms. We will still be inferior to NEWTs-level students, but between your raw power and fighting experience, you may defeat them if it’s not an exhibition process.”

“The other classes?” This was not too disheartening, but Professor McGonagall and Flitwick – and their assistant teachers – were widely acknowledged as the best to prepare for the major exams.

“In Herbology we shouldn’t have too many problems,” the former Gryffindor told her. “Professor Sprout is following an evolved form of the curriculum, and the plausible scenarios they can use Herbology in a trial for are a Temple of Plants-type challenge or collect some rare herbs and ingredients in a limited time. But that’s the three best classes out of the seven fundamental courses.”

Hermione didn’t list the names, but Alexandra heard them nonetheless. Astronomy, History, DADA, and Potions; the list of magical subjects of absolutely no utility at Hogwarts was depressingly long. And if one wanted to add the electives, Muggle Studies and Divination were also going to be included.

And of course Arithmancy wasn’t great either; they had just begun it at the beginning of this school year, when their opponents would have studied for two more years, if they were the same age.

“Astronomy shouldn’t have been a core class in the first place,” Hermione continued in a semi-apologetic tone. “None of the major schools have it in their fundamentals, and the perturbations to our sleep schedule are not worth what little advantage it will give us...if there’s an advantage. History is a joke, of course. What isn’t Goblin Wars, we learned by ourselves. The teachers we have are not worth passing the entrance’s door.”

Well, Alexandra wasn’t going to disagree with that. Every time she bothered going to a History class, the young teenager was using earmuffs to not listen to the useless ramblings. After that, it was in general an hour to do some homework she had not finished the last evening or some personal studies. As exhausting as it was, she had to keep up somewhat in non-magical subjects like mathematics, foreign languages, physics, and history.

“And then there is DADA,” finished her bookworm friend after a couple of minutes. “It would already be disastrous if the other schools had a normal curriculum, but Durmstrang has a class of Dark Arts, and Beauxbatons has ‘Offensive and Defensive Magic’.”

If she had not met Delacour beforehand, the Basilisk-Slayer might have thought the latter was less dangerous than the former. Now, Alexandra knew the truth. It just meant the French were trained for Light and/or Dark Magic. Sure, Romanov and the other Durmstrang Champions would have a huge advantage in wielding the powers of the Dark, but the students of Southern France would have weapons to defend themselves. The Hogwarts’ Champions had none...save Alexandra, but she was the exception to the rule.

“This summer is going to be studying and re-studying to not be ridiculous on D-Day, isn’t it?” the green-eyed Champion of the Morrigan groaned.

**31 March 1994, Knockturn Alley, London, England**

There were many ugly and unpleasant rumours about Knockturn Alley. In itself, it wasn’t surprising in the least. Knockturn Alley was, according to everyone, a lair of Dark Wizards, an alley where murders and bloody rituals were accomplished behind fear-inducing doors. Aurors only ventured into this place for patrols in groups of five or more. Children were ordered to stay far away from it. The number of raids from Ministry authorities was regularly increasing, but failed to slow down the number of illegal activities like smuggling eggs of protected species and books treating on the Dark Arts.

In reality, most of the rumours spread about Knockturn Alley were utterly false. There were no armies of werewolves waiting to rally to the eventual return of You-Know-Who – the infamous werewolf revolutionary known as Fenrir Greyback had long fled to Germany, possibly in December 1981. There were no cohorts of Death Eaters hiding under the disreputable shops – the pure-bloods had long stopped their recruitment operations and were drinking expensive liquors in crystal glasses before going to a Wizengamot session or the lodge they paid to watch Quidditch games.

One thing which wasn’t exaggerated, alas, was the fact Aurors never went alone in this dark labyrinth of badly-lit streets. Because while Knockturn Alley might not be the lair of evil every law-abiding citizen thought it to be, it was a violent one. This was what happened when you managed to concentrate in a single location a lot of wizards, witches, and other magical beings who didn’t manage to earn a regular income and refused to mingle in areas where there was a Muggle presence.

As a result, while entering Knockturn Alley wasn’t exactly asking to get your throat slit, it was not considered to be a wise move either. And after the sun set over London, it was considered prudent to stay away from Knockturn if you valued your purse and your health. That people wouldn’t kill you didn’t mean getting beaten for an hour and getting your Sickles stolen was pleasurable.

Ludovic Bagman knew all this information and more, but he still had entered Knockturn Alley anyway tonight.

The Department Head of Magical Games and Sports had entered the London slum running, and his tired feet and legs had not been allowed a rest in the last half-hour.

The former Beater of the Wimbourne Wasps grimaced as he arrived in a new street he did not recognise any more than the last four he had run through. A strident voice in his mind told him to stop running, as there were mysterious places in this block of houses it was better to never go visiting.

The rest of his brain screamed there was a small armoured column of goblins in pursuit, and since they had managed to tag him with a sort of gold-coloured Rune on his right arm, he had to keep them far away until the effect dissipated and he could escape. Already the brilliance of the Apparition-blocker was fading. A few more minutes, and he would be able to leave London and the horrible creatures behind him for a few weeks. And next time he went to the Ministry, he certainly wouldn’t leave to drink a few glasses of Firewhiskey in a pub! Merlin’s beard, wasn’t it possible for a wizard to spend an evening in good company without being attacked by these aggressive beasts?

Why were they unhappy anyway? Ludo always paid his debts...eventually. And it was only two hundred thousand Galleons this time! Damn it! It wasn’t like he had thought Potter would fail to arrive first during the Potion-themed preliminary! The Ravenclaw had left the opposition in the dust in the Temple of Plants and earned him five thousand Galleons! Betting on her was a sure win!

But the Slayer of two Basilisks had not won by the fault of that evil bat, Severus Snape, and now he had goblins pursuing him in Knockturn Alley after sunset.

“I see him, Bronzewrath! I see the thief!”

Ludovic Bagman was almost tempted to shout back that since most of this money had been used in illegal and lucrative bets, it wasn’t technically thievery...but he doubted the beasts were interested in a lesson on bets and their legal limits.

And so he continued to run, as his breathing grew more and more erratic, and running began to hurt. Ah, if only there was a shop selling brooms nearby! Then he would be able to show them the talent which had allowed him to rise to the national team!

Unfortunately, the streets of Knockturn had few shops, and none of them he had seen until now sold brooms, carpets, or any sort of flying locomotion.

And there was no help coming from the inhabitants of the Alley. Knockturn was not deserted. There were many people observing the merry chase he had going to escape the goblins, but no one was intervening. Morgana’s dark soul, there were even some hags betting how long he was going to last!

“AFTER HIM! WARRIORS! THE THIEF WILL PAY HIS DEBT IN GOLD OR WE WILL TAKE IT FROM HIM IN BLOOD!”

Ludo tried to run faster. He didn’t feel like he was accelerating the pace, though. His legs were killing him. But he had to run faster. He had not one hundred Galleons on him...and he had not ten thousand in his personal vault. The last month had not been a lucky one for him.

Too late he saw a black cloak emerge from the shadows and deliberately bar his way.

“OUT OF MY WAY!” He shouted. “OUT-“

Pain erupted everywhere in his body, and when the world had stopped spinning, the ex-Beater realised he was lying on the putrid ground of Knockturn Alley.

The Department Head spat blood and tried to see who had attacked him. If only he had his wand! But the little beasts had managed to steal it while he was drunk and-

Ludo felt his blood freeze in his veins as the black-cloaked being removed his hood, revealing strangely luminescent dark eyes and a face which was so pallid it was evident it had not seen the sun in decades, if ever.

The former member of the Wimbourne Wasps gasped. He had been really, really bad in the DADA classes, but he could recognise a vampire.

“Good night to you, Ludovic Bagman,” the night creature greeted him like he was a friend. “I was wondering if you could pass a message to Minister Fudge from my Lord, the Master of the Shadow Blades?”

“Yes? Yes, I can pass a message!” A quick glance told him the goblins had stopped twenty feet away, evidently not wishing to approach the vampire any closer than necessary. But the mark on his arm was almost gone; he was going to be able to Apparate away any second now! “I just ask we go somewhere else for the message delivery! I have-“

“Don’t worry, Ludovic Bagman. *You* will be part of the message.”

A tendril of red magic tightened around his hands and his arms, and Ludovic Bagman screamed.

**Author’s note**: Sometimes, Alexandra losing a preliminary has consequences...just not for her. Bagman should really know better about ‘sure bets’ and what they entail when they unavoidably fail...

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