**Chapter 74**

**Beltane Preliminary**

**Bloody Beltane Part 1**

**28 April 1994, Saint Mungo’s Hospital, London, England**

To her complete lack of surprise, Bellatrix had seen uncountable theories about the reasons she chose the Swiss for her purposes expressed by newspapers and Ministry officials after the ICW officially declared her ‘innocent’. If one quickly removed the Lovegood-styled ones, they could be divided into three categories.

The first, and the most well-spread in the Ministry-owned ‘truths’, was she simply wanted to taunt the mourning families of the poor wizards and witches she had murdered during the war.

The second rumoured reason, not totally encouraged by Fudge and his band of imbeciles but not really discouraged either, was that it was clearly evident that she wanted to be overseas to practise all sort of dark rituals and murder innocents where Aurors couldn’t dare travel to, never mind touch her.

Third explanation: the Swiss were the only people corrupt enough to let her bribe her way out for a trial, all other courts would have condemned her due to the ‘huge mountain of witnesses and proof’ the Ministry of Magic had gathered about her.

In Bellatrix’s opinion, the reality that a lot of wizards and witches drank and ate these lies proved that the philosophy of Voldemort was incredibly right. Whatever the legion of flaws he had, her former Master had been right on at least one thing: Britain was maybe an island having an incredible density of magical beings, but the overwhelming majority were sheep in dire need of a worthy shepherd.

No, the Black-born witch had not gone to Geneva because she wanted to mock her families’ victims. Bellatrix had gone to plead in front of the ICW because for all the British delusions, being allowed to walk free anywhere in Europe was vital to her plans.

No, Bellatrix wasn’t practising Dark Rituals and the sort of black magic a lot of Light fools shivered at the first word of. Seriously, the Slytherin woman had burned and asked many favours to obtain this ICW trial. She would need to be a monumental idiot to create of her own volition the very circumstances that would make her an outlaw again.

As for the third explanation, it was so ridiculous Bellatrix had laughed a lot hearing it. In the mouths of the Ministry spokesperson, it was like Britain was a society where no proud official was ever found opening his purse to let Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot give them generous contributions, generally in the form of large bags of gold and silver. And of course it totally ‘forgot’ all but one of her judges hadn’t been Swiss citizens in the first place. Merlin’s beard, it was incredibly amusing how the ‘proper and upstanding wizards’ who had never stepped a foot outside the Isles were astonished that all in all, their nation was on its way to becoming irrelevant and hated on the world stage.

Some of the idiots probably couldn’t fathom why the continent hadn’t come to the rescue when the Death Eaters went on to gain more and more victories. Yet they or their immediate predecessors had never lifted a finger when Grindelwald’s armies conquered Europe.

And of course, in addition to these moronic theories, Bellatrix had confirmed several times the Order of the Phoenix’s militiamen were camped outside Malfoy Manor and several other pureblood residences that she had been fond of before her imprisonment.

In other words, the Light had reacted exactly like she wanted them to.

No one among her enemies had voiced the theory that the ICW’s verdict had been the first step of her plan to visit Saint Mungo’s on this rainy day in April.

Here the black-haired woman could almost hear the whimpering noises of the mediocre Gryffindors serving Dumbledore. Why do something so complicated when one could clearly enter on the ground floor without any problems?

The quick answer was: as a matter of fact, entering the biggest and most prominent medical centre of Britain in a hostile manner was incredibly difficult. The ward schemes had been improved nearly every year in the 70s, and there were major defences specifically waiting at every level for any criminal who was stupid enough to try storming the building. Plus in case of dire emergencies, patients could be evacuated to various fortified locations in less than ten minutes.

There were rarely more than four Aurors and six Hit-Wizards patrolling inside and outside the hospital, but they were only the most visible part of the protections it was granted, and in Bellatrix’s opinion, these wand-nullities were hardly what everyone relied upon when the curses started to fly around.

Thus, she would certify that yes, having an ‘innocent’ label was very, very important for her plans. No alarm shrieked as she walked through the reception hall. And while it was true she had gathered her hair into a bun, dyed them to a light brown, and decided to wear a brilliant yellow robe which made her look like a Hufflepuff, the name her papers in her bag would present her with was truly Bellatrix Black-Lestrange, widow of the much unlamented Rodolphus Lestrange.

“Good morning,” Bellatrix said pleasantly to the blonde-haired witch behind the reception desk. “My name is Ms Black. I had contacted you yesterday for a visit of the Janus Thickey Ward. My House is very troubled about certain issues concerning one of your long-term residents, Mr. Viper.”

“Yes, Miss Black, Healer Sackville passed the word of your concerns, your visit has been approved,” that the younger witch was a Slytherin was kind of evident as her mood had gone from bored to deeply respectful in less time it took to say it. “The Janus Thickey Ward is on Fourth Floor, Mr. Viper is the third room on the right.”

“Thank you, have a pleasant day.”

And she was able to walk to the stairs without anything more problematic than a young brown-haired intern in Trainee Healer robes watching her backside the entire time she took to reach the stairs. Bellatrix did her best not to sigh at this behaviour. This was definitely typical Gryffindor behaviour, though given what Cissy had told her about her nephew, Bellatrix knew it was best not to cast stones.

At least there was no person screaming or making a ruckus, signifying the alterations to her appearance, the secrecy, and her manoeuvres had paid off. It was good, because Bellatrix was not a Metamorphmagus, and her infiltration skills had been inadequate even before her lengthy stay at Azkaban. Somehow, something in her head darkened and her teeth gritted.

“Bloody Dementors...” her lips cursed.

For all her Occlumency mastery and the other Dark Arts experiments she had performed after her NEWTs, over a decade of imprisonment in one of the worst magical prisons to ever exist had left scars in her psyche and her flesh.

Damn the Ministry for using those demons. And after that they had the gall to believe it was the Death Eaters who invented the cruellest tortures to exist?

“You will pay for that, Crouch. I’m going to make sure your fate is proportional to the sentence you condemned me to.”

And after those words, Bellatrix closed her mouth as she arrived on the Fourth Floor. Nothing remarkable to say about it, it was white, it was a hospital wing with the normal spring decorations, security messages, and luminous paintings which were the norm in any great European hospital. The only thing different compared to what she had seen of the three floors blew was the rather minor number of medical personnel working around, but then as the announcement boards indicated, all the wings of Fourth Floor were dedicated for mid-term or long-term problems, not the kind of wounds, trauma and diseases which were cured one way or another in a few days.

It wasn’t a surprise to see that the door which was her ultimate destination was already opened and a middle-aged witch with a hair colour half-way between red and brown, long Healer robes, and a rather aristocratic pose whispering incantations on the immobile figure lying on the white bed.

“I don’t even know why Albus ordered me to investigate...” Bellatrix heard her whisper, a comment which almost surprised her. So the old fossil had finally figured out it was a good idea to investigate what sort of crimes Sirius had been involved in the last years? Maybe there was hope for Dumbledore...or there would have been hope, if she wasn’t about to prepare his complete and definitive ruin.

“Receiving a direct and non-secretive answer from the man is very difficult,” Bellatrix said loudly, entering the white hospital room and quickly closing the door behind her. A chain of locking and silencing Charms were soon added against the walls and the doors.

And just in time, it seemed.

“BELLATRIX LESTRANGE!”

The former Death Eater rolled her eyes.

“It’s Bellatrix Black now. Or Bellatrix Black-Lestrange. Must I buy enough adds to print it in one page on the *Daily Prophet*?”

A wand was pointed at her, but it was slow, horribly slow, and a disarming Charm stopped the potential duel in its tracks.

“What are you doing here?”

Bellatrix gave one of her best contemptuous looks to the younger witch.

“Do you really expect me to answer that question, Emmeline Vance?” The face of the Order of the Phoenix’s member reddened. “Please go sit on the chair near the window, I will deal with you in a moment.”

The Vance woman didn’t move an inch, continuing to glare at her.

“I am a Healer. If you believe I am going to let you hurt one of this hospital’s patients without-“

“But dear, I am not here to hurt Mr. Viper. I assure you, causing him physical or mental distress is far, far from my intention.”

At last, the Light witch obeyed her command and let her approach the bed.

“Impressive illusion ward,” the sister of Narcissa Malfoy acknowledged, before using an elaborate illusion-breaker which made Finite Incantatem look like amateur work. One instant later, the unremarkable, Muggle-like visage of the patient was banished to be replaced by a far more aristocratic-looking head with black hair and an aquiline nose.

“Emmeline, let me present to you my cousin and the future Lord of House Black, Regulus Arcturus Black, younger brother of-“

“Sirius Black,” finished the follower of Dumbledore. “It can’t be...the man was killed by You-Know-Who!”

There were a few things that never made any sense no matter how you told them, and this case was definitely one. Sometimes, the Light’s attempts to rewrite history were rather pathetic. Did she really use the word ‘sometimes’? No, it was ‘always’ or ‘often’...

“Why would the Dark Lord have killed him?” Bellatrix asked curiously. “I will be the first to agree there wasn’t a lot of mental stability left in him by 1981, but Regulus was the future Lord Black and if he died, the entire fortune, the prestige, the influence, and the alliances forged by our ancestors was at risk to be cut from us.”

“I heard he was going to desert, that he had panicked once he understood the crimes he was ordered to commit...”

“Oh he panicked, all right,” though to his credit, Regulus had been given an order which was far, far more disgusting than a mere assassination. “And do you know where he went in his distress? To the only member of his family he knew for sure was not going to betray him to the Dark Lord.”

“No,” Emmeline Vance shook her head in instinctive refusal. “No, you’re lying...”

“The spell maintaining him in this coma and showing similar effects to the Draught of the Living Death is a particularly nasty inheritance of House Black, and can only be known to members of it, since the only surviving book where the incantation and the instructions are written is a property of House Black. And it doesn’t really need a particularly talented Dark Wizard or any blood to be cast.”

“Sirius Black would have never done this!”

Bellatrix chuckled loudly at that.

“Cursing in anger the brother he had always hated? Compared to some of his past actions, I don’t think he would have thought twice about it.”

“It could be you. You have the knowledge and the power to cast such a spell!”

“And the reason why I would have cast it upon my cousin?” Bellatrix wondered. “Unlike Regulus, I couldn’t inherit the Lordship of House Black and access its main vaults even if I hadn’t been later imprisoned at Azkaban. Our House has never wavered on the inheritance issues. We always went with the strict Salic law. Removing him from play would have been counter-productive, idiotic, and one of the most short-sighted crimes of the war.”

Sirius, on the other hand, had the perfect motive to remove his younger brother from play. If Regulus was still in the contest, what was left of House Black after the Samhain of 1981 would have rallied and supported him, as the alternative was a wizard who respected nothing and spat on their traditions, cultures, alliances, and magic.

“Sirius is intelligent. If he had really done this heinous deed, why would he have spared the life of his brother? It would be far safer to kill this Death Eater...”

“There are not many crimes which can remove you from the line of succession,” the elder witch said quietly, “but killing your sibling or one of your direct relatives is definitely among them. If he had killed Regulus, magic would have ripped apart his magic core before the Lord’s ring appeared on his middle finger.”

 Bellatrix sang a first incantation, a rather simple Futhark-based counter-curse, and saw with pleasure no great wards or additional curses had been added to the original one.

“Sloppy,” the former Death Eater commented. “Definitely Sirius’ work. The Powers gave him incredible talent, and he squandered every drop of it.”

“Sirius is Lord Black. Even if you wake his brother, nothing will change.”

Bellatrix internally laughed at that. Assuredly the members of the Order of the Phoenix weren’t really well-versed in the old magical rituals.

“My poor dear, do you really think it’s a coincidence I’ve come here so close to Beltane?” Unlike certain Death Eaters, she preferred extensive reconnaissance and tight-scheduled actions.

“Dumbledore will stop you!”

“And who will tell him what he needs to know?” Emmeline Vance paled, suddenly realising that after all, the lives of the Lord of House Black and his youngest brother weren’t perhaps the greatest problems she needed to worry about.

**28 April 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“This will be our last two editions of the *Loud Duck* for this school year,” Nigel explained. “The penultimate edition will be released on the morning of the last trial; that way everyone will have a bit of reading before the preliminary begins.”

“And the wrackspurt-filled heads will have the rankings of the Heliopaths,” Luna added dreamily.

“Err...yes,” as always, Hermione had the greatest difficulty keeping her self-control when the younger Ravenclaw went on to proclaim how clever and beautiful her imaginary creatures were. “Will we have the time to devote so much time for a last edition of the *Loud Duck* however? Exams are coming soon...”

“We will work on the newspaper the moment Beltane’s weekend is over,” Alexandra said, shaking her head at the fact the bookworm-in-chief of the Exiled had not changed her priorities since first year. “Hopefully, we will be ready to print it a week later. If it’s not, well...we will return to the exams’ revisions and deliver what is ready after the exams. Aside from the last Quidditch games and the final tests, I don’t think there will be a lot to comment upon after the preliminaries.”

“Yes, yes,” Morag commented impatiently. “Now let’s return to the big decision we’ve been debating for the last twenty minutes. Do we publish Cedric Diggory’s photo on page one?”

“No,” Nigel and Alexandra replied immediately.

“Yes,” Luna and Hermione countered.

“I don’t see the journalistic point...” Alexandra groaned.

“That’s because you haven’t listened to how many girls are crazy about trying to have autographs of our Hufflepuff Champion these days,” Morag informed her with a condescending expression. “The *Loud Duck* is going to sell better than the Daily Prophet if we have a nice photo of him to satisfy our feminine audience.”

“Don’t complain if Cho storms the Common Room and tries to kill you,” Alexandra sighed. “She’s unlikely to thank you about anything that pushes more fan-girls in her boyfriend’s direction.”

“Now, now, Alex,” her red-haired friend teased her. “No need to be jealous.”

Alexandra raised her eyebrows.

“You realise, of course, that I’m still the leader of the preliminaries, right? Cedric Diggory has won a lot of points, but he’s still stuck at two hundred points while I have two hundred and thirty-eight. And in the two tasks where we competed together, I beat him twice.” Arguably it had been by only one point in the Potion preliminary, but then the sixth-year Hufflepuff had - supposedly - a lot of experience and knowledge she did not. In the Temple of Plants, though, her victory had been one-sided and uncontested.

“Yes, but you weren’t in a swimsuit when it counted,” Nigel chuckled. “And I think that’s all the girls, including most of our Ravenclaw housemates, care about now. Well that and Diggory is officially the Hufflepuff Champion. Technically, you aren’t.”

“That makes a depressing amount of sense,” Alexandra grimaced comically before rolling her eyes. With Roger Davies at one hundred and fifty-two points, theoretically she still could be beaten. It would take a near-perfect performance on the older boy’s part and a disastrous run on hers for this scenario to exist, obviously. “I can’t believe any Badger save him wasn’t successful enough to reach the one hundred points mark.”

Viewed from a pragmatic manner, Alexandra was convinced now it was vital to ensure Cedric Diggory remained the Hufflepuff Champion during the entire European Magical Tournament. If the favourite of the Hogwarts’ girls was crippled or killed, the rest of the Badgers who served as his advisors and replacements were going to take bloody beating after bloody beating. Their ranking for now as indicated in the soon-to-be published *Loud Duck* was:

*Cedric Diggory – 200 points – qualified and Champion*

*Tamsin Applebee – 90 points*

*Malcolm Preece – 80 points*

*Ernest Macmillan – 70 points*

*Heidi Macavoy – 51 points*

*Herbert Fleet – 40 points*

*Eurig Cadwallader – 29 points*

*Susan Bones – 20 points*

As she had repeated to Susan many times lately, everything was still possible for the second, third, fourth and fifths places, even for the Hufflepuffs who had yet to mark any point after three preliminaries.

“Don’t forget the number of points for them is horribly biased. They haven’t the bonuses the Slytherins were granted.”

“The points their cheating gave them, you mean,” there was a lot of ways to describe how the Slytherins managed to get better scores than the Badgers, and many weren’t really polite to say in Hogwarts’ Great Hall.

On the good side for Montague and his friends, stealing secrets and bending the rules until they broke was an ancestral tradition of the long-abandoned Tri-Wizard Tournament. On the bad side, even after cheating, Diggory and she still had a colossal lead over them.

“Maybe Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini will give all they have and leave Warrington and his junior Death Eaters in the dust,” Hermione’s tone had rarely been so fatalistic.

“Assuming Transfiguration is what we allowed in a few days, it’s not good for them. McGonagall’s class is not their favourite magical course.” It didn’t help that in the lower classes, Transfiguration was not really useful. The ability to transform a crystal glass into a large bird certainly gave you a sense of achievement when you were successful, but outside a classroom this category of spell was not holding a candle to Charms or the most favoured hexes. “And Warrington and his friends have a good advance.”

*Cassius Warrington – 128 points*

*Graham Montague – 99 points*

*Theodore Nott – 98 points*

*Lucian Bole – 46 points*

*Tracey Davis – 46 points*

*Blaise Zabini – 40 points*

*Peregrine Derrick – 14 points*

*Vincent Crabbe – 1 point*

*Gregory Goyle – 1 point*

Realistically, at best the best friend of Daphne Greengrass and the son of her magical guardian could catch up and remove Lucian Bole from the list of potential Champions. And yes, it was the best scenario. Expecting them to equal Nott or Montague was foolhardy; Snape could very well reveal to his favourite snakes one or two secrets, and Tracey was over fifty points behind the Heir of House Nott.

“The Slytherins were given advantages, but you have high scores too,” Nigel pointed out.

“Yes, but we weren’t told what the second and third preliminary were,” Morag retorted.

*Alexandra Potter – 238 points*

*Roger Davies – 152 points*

*Cho Chang – 130 points*

*Hermione Granger – 106 points*

*Morag MacDougal – 95 points*

“Speaking of our rankings, it was my understanding that Morag was supposed to finish fourth, not fifth,” Alexandra said while grabbing Crookshanks before he trampled her homework. The big cat emitted a loud meow of protest, before purring once she began to caress the orange fur. “Is it subject to change?”

“I don’t know how the last preliminary will test us,” Hermione replied cautiously, “but I will certainly try to return to the fifth position.” The former Gryffindor huffed. “It’s not my fault Morag completely failed the Potions preliminary.”

“Hey!”

The Potter Heiress let her two friends bicker for a few seconds before throwing blue sparks with her wand.

“And Gryffindor?”

“For the moment,” Morag declared thoughtfully, “The potential Gryffindor Champions are fine.”

*Angelina Johnson – 124 points*

*Geoffrey Hooper – 119 points*

*Neville Longbottom – 103 points*

*Fred Weasley – 88 points*

*George Weasley – 88 points*

*Katie Bell – 80 points*

*Kenneth Towler – 69 points*

*Leo Black – 59 points*

*Alicia Spinnet – 37 points*

*Ronald Weasley – 36 points*

*Cormac McLaggen – 23 points*

“Angelina is a polyvalent spell-caster, she takes her studies seriously for a Gryffindor, and aside from Potions, she has not shown any major weaknesses. She’s also able to discipline the Twins when they go overboard,” the Irish teenager explained. “I have my doubts on Hooper and Longbottom, but they have scored points in every preliminary, and the Twins can help them if they have to deal with unforeseen difficulties. Katie Bell and Kenneth Towler, the next high-ranking scorers of the Lions, are also people we can work with. It’s below them the massive problems await.”

Problems called Leo Black, Ronald Weasley, and Cormac McLaggen. They could also be nicknamed ‘future disasters of the Light’, ‘international incidents in-being’, and ‘distrustful of every other House that was not Gryffindor and Hufflepuff’, and in the case of the Badgers, it was because they believed Diggory and his fellow housemates were useless. It would be far better for everyone and Hogwarts’ reputation if they didn’t leave Hogwarts next school year.

“I can try to arrange a few accidents for them,” Alexandra proposed. “But I can only do that if all the Houses are competing together. If we don’t, my hands will be tied.”

But so far, except the first preliminary on the Black Lake, the Houses’ challenges had been taken with at least one other House. Surely Dumbledore was going to spare his budget a few thousand Galleons and do the same thing for the last preliminary’s task, right?

**29 April 1994, sixty kilometres south of the Galapagos Islands**

“I don’t like this, Heinrich,” Gilderoy Lockhart said. “I don’t like this at all.”

“I can assure you, I am of the same opinion as you are,” the German curse-breaker replied. “Our jailors have sent us to the middle of nowhere with infinite precautions, and now suddenly they are lax and careless? Something very wrong is about to happen.”

Gilderoy nodded as their little group walked on the beach of white-yellow sand. On their right, the ocean’s water was still an azure blue, and the comfort of their prisoner’s camp was more on the level of a hotel on a paradise island than a Dark Lord’s secret prison.

In appearance, one could say little had changed in the last months.

But appearances could play tricks on a human’s eyes, and in this case, there were plenty of things no prisoner had missed.

The power of the outer and inner wards keeping them trapped here was clearly weakening. Gilderoy wasn’t a sensor, but since at dawn and dusk the initial power of the magical barriers was creating rainbows of power over their prison, it wasn’t like it could be missed. The prehistoric sharks guarding the island from conventional invasions were nowhere to be seen. Day after day, their fins had been rarer and rarer, until five days ago where no one had seen them anymore.

The only thing which had not been weakened was the strength of the were-cobras on the island. On the other hand, it served to emphasize that something upsetting the status quo was about to happen. Twenty days ago, there had been fifty were-cobras patrolling, now this number was closer to two hundred and every day there was an increase in their effectives.

The number of prisoners was also on the ascendant, and it wasn’t good news.

“There was a rumour a new group was screened this morning.”

“I’ve heard it too,” Heinrich replied. “Assuming it’s not a misdirection or another fake rumour, we’re about to be ‘reinforced’ by werewolves.”

“Werewolves?” Lockhart could not help but grimace as he repeated the w-word. He had nothing against the cursed skinchangers per se, but it would take an imbecile to deny that as they were denied human beings’ rights in dozens of countries, dozens of packs of werewolves tended to favour very violent approaches to express their ideals to the rest of the world. “Our Light friends are sure to love it.”

Not many Trinity members had arrived in the last months, but this had been more than compensated by dozens of wizards and witches of the Army of Light. And if his sarcastic sentence wasn’t clue enough, these fanatics were not his friends nor the friends of any of the major factions in this prison. There was a reason why the majority of the were-cobras were always watching over these people, and it wasn’t for a most beautiful smile contest.

“They are going to glare harder, you mean,” Heinrich chuckled before returning to a more serious expression. “I’m afraid that each time our jailors increase their numbers, the risk of being overwhelmed and killed by them if the snakes abandon us is multiplied by two or three.”

There was nothing to disagree with in the sentences of the German wizard. In fact, it was probably very optimistic: any of the Light wizards and witches looked like they had been imprisoned for a long, long time, and in far more Spartan conditions than they had been on this island. Many men and women were watching them like carnivorous beasts waiting for the slightest opportunity to pounce.

“One of the Japanese wizards tried to speak with them yesterday,” Dudley Dursley stated. The young wererat looked far healthier than when he had arrived here. “He had to run away very fast. Apparently, having contacts with some of the magical foxes’ clans is bad in their books.”

“The Kitsunes’ clans? The ICW has never recognised them as Dark. They are just particularly clever tricksters and mischievous skinchangers refusing to abide by the Statute.”

And if the deities of this world of magic were good, the Weasley Twins would not meet one until they were dead and buried. The former DADA teacher preferred not to think about the devastation a Kitsune and the red-haired pranksters could cause once they united their pranking skills.

“Looks like their standards are far higher than the ICW,” the cousin of the Basilisk-Slayer shrugged.

“Indeed,” Heinrich approved. “And since our jailors have proved they are not incompetent and the schedule of new arrivals is too regular for it to be a reaction to an invasion or a series of raids, this suggests we and the new prisoners are bait.”

“Yes,” Gilderoy agreed. “But what is the common point between were-cobras, werewolves, the Army of Light, the Trinity, wererats, criminals, and other beings aside from having annoyed the Exchequer at one point or another in their lives?”

**30 April 1994, Sherwood Forest, England**

The Sherwood Forrest was really, really famous by its historic association with the legend of Robin Hood.

What Muggles were not aware of, however, was that the Prince of Thieves and his joyous band of outlaws were neither the first nor the most successful criminals trying to escape the reach of ‘justice’ away from the cities and the rest of England.

According to the tales and the few scripts of the Hogwarts’ library Peter had found, the ancient druids had used their powers to accelerate the growth of this forest first, in their attempts to evade the massacres of Roman battle-wizards.

It had been, if one judged the number of small magical villages once erected near Sherwood, a quite successful endeavour. The forest the Muggles were allowed to see might not seem special, but the magical one was far bigger and more than capable of ensuring that a few armies lost themselves on its darkest paths.

The druids were long gone now, that much the last of the Pettigrew line could confirm. Their successors and successors’ successors were extinct too. The wizards’ villages near Sherwood were long abandoned.

As far as Peter had been able to ascertain, it had not been a deliberate policy of the Minister of Magic. It was more an aftershock of the establishment of the Statute centuries ago. Before the organisation which was going to become the ICW had divided the world in two, the wizards of Sherwood had used the woods and the neighbouring areas both as a sanctuary and an important magical preserve for rare creatures and extremely valuable herbs and fruits, not to mention everything that could serve as Potion ingredients. And the Muggles included in the ‘arrangement’ paid a lot of gold and silver to access this ‘market’ giving them medicines and healing substances like no other.

Evidently, the entire system had collapsed with the Statute of Secrecy. It did no good to have the best ingredients around when there was no one to purchase them anymore. In a book the rat Animagus had bought from Flourish and Blotts, the ‘official historian’ of the Ministry repeated ten times the measure had been popular and accepted without a whisper of discontent. Somehow, the Gryffindor man thought the Ministry had just as little shame shouting lies and rewriting history centuries ago as it did now.

And no, it wasn’t an attempt to distract himself from watching the large pool of blood around which half a dozen vampires were practising their nauseating Thaumaturgy ritual.

“The lunch has some difficulties to stay in the stomach, rat?” A young blonde vampire opened his mouth cockily.

“I have walked on battlefields with three times that number of corpses, *mosquito*,” Peter had the satisfaction to see the bloodsucker gain some colour on his pale face.

He wasn’t going to admit that yes, this ritual was bothering him. Seeing dozens of people being cut down on a battlefield was something he could handle. In the fires of battle, when adrenalin was pumped in your head, seeing people fight and die was fine for him, as long as he didn’t care about the individuals. Fortunately, there weren’t many wizards or beings which fell in this category these days.

But seeing criminals and plenty of men be dragged in chains to the ritual altar creating the monstrously powerful blood ward around Sherwood was something entirely different, something he didn’t like.

Peter was ready to admit the Shadow Blades had not much of a choice if they really wanted to claim lands on the British Isles without being defeated militarily and hunted to oblivion by the Aurors and the Hit-Wizards, but this was really disgusting.

The ‘Blood Runes’ the vampires’ thaumaturgists used were draining the blood of two victims per hour, and the deed itself was neither quick nor painless. And it was pretty deranging to watch to boot, at the risk of repeating himself.

A familiar cold wind made him shiver and the noise of shoes not designed for a walk in the forest arrived to his ears.

“Tiberius told me there were several Patronuses which attempted to contact you,” Agnes Calpurnius spoke, flanked by five lesser vampires built on the type of muscular gorillas.

“Indeed, Lady Calpurnius,” Peter had no intention to lie, since hundreds of people with the eyes to see had seen them. Thank gods he knew the Obliviation spell, otherwise there would have been a few Statute breaches. What were those idiots thinking? “Some old acquaintances seemed to have realised I’m not dead. I have only their words to make a judgement, but they appear to believe past friendships give them the right to order me around like they want.”

From James, it was kind of expected. The man who had been Prongs was crazy after over a decade at Azkaban, there was no debating that. From Lord Sirius Black aka Padfoot, it was a bit more surprising, but really the son of Walburga Black had never been punished enough when he violated the law or ignored the redlines. And a decade of people being forced to bow and give him some ‘my Lord Black’ had not given him some humility.

“You have not to worry, Lady Calpurnius. I will stand watch here and guard the ritual site until it is complete on Beltane.”

“I am pleased to hear this,” the female Coven Elder gave him a smile letting him ‘admire’ the impressive dentition of a *Vampiri Orientem*. “But Lord Victor’s concerns are elsewhere. This Remus Lupin...is he the vampire-hunter which has caused so much damage in the Balkans and Germany to the local covens?”

“I have not met him for over a decade,” Peter replied. “But I think so. It isn’t like there are many werewolves able to stay calm and collected in vampire hunts.”

There was only one, in fact. When blood and meat were arriving to their muzzles, the existing werewolves often went feral in mere seconds. Remus, except on the nights of full moon, was one of the rare exceptions to this rule.

“Outstanding. Given that this vampire-slayer was kind enough to give you an appointment on the night of Beltane, do you think a prize of ten thousand Galleons is enough to convince you to put down the collared dog of the Light?”

**1 May 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It was the day of Beltane, and Alexandra had a feeling something was going to go horribly, horribly wrong today when she woke up after a three hours-long sleep.

Looking out the window there was no hint the problem was going to come from the weather, at least. There was a moderate wind coming from the west and a few white clouds, but the sky was mostly blue.

Bah, what was going to happen was going to happen, and only time would tell if her contingencies proved enough. In the meantime, she was going to eat; starting the preliminary with an empty stomach had all the chances to leave her famished.

Hermione was already in the Great Hall when she arrived. Morag and most of Ravenclaw House weren’t.

“We are going in the Forbidden Forest today!” her friend grumbled as she served herself a large meal of herrings disguised by the House Elves as an altered form of pancakes.

“Now you’re just dramatic, Hermione,” she replied. “The stands and whatever they installed for the challenge are at the edge of the forest at worse. And you felt the wards they used to protect the stands from outside threats. Apart from the trees, we might as well be in the Quidditch stadium again.”

The librarian expert muttered something even her improved senses didn’t catch on before returning to her breakfast, and Alexandra did the same. The Hogwarts Hall rapidly filled with students, something that would have been an oddity at this hour if there wasn’t the Quidditch preliminary. On Sunday, students usually woke up late and left their Common Room even later.

But today the last preliminary was organised, and even those who didn’t participate had left their beds to encourage their favourites: between the green, red, yellow, and blue robes and sport decorations, one could almost believe an all-Quidditch day had been organised.

“Do you think someone is aware of what we have to do today?” Morag asked once she had arrived and started to devour and drink like there was no tomorrow.

“Difficult to say,” the three other Houses oscillated between prudent confidence and highly-nervous expressions.

Twenty minutes later, as the noise of acclamations and victory songs was making it more and more difficult to have a proper conversation, Albus Dumbledore rose from his throne-seat and asked for the Champions to leave their seats and walk to the red tent near the Forbidden Forest, where the judges apparently waited for them.

“Time to see if we were right about Transfiguration and Magical Creatures,” the red-haired Ravenclaw whispered to her as their House applauded and wished them good luck when the three girls walked out the Great Hall with Roger Davies and Cho Chang following close on their heels.

As if to answer the comment, a loud whinny was heard as they descended the marble stairs of the entrance.

“A horse?”

Alexandra grimaced, having felt a minuscule pulse of light.

“Since we are near the Forbidden Forest, I think it’s more likely we will meet the mythological Light cousin of the horse.”

“A Unicorn?” Cho blustered out. “But they’re a protected species and harming them is a crime!”

“Therefore we can only assume the task is not going to be ‘hurting them’...”

The Ravenclaws were the first to enter the red tent near the large stands where the public was going to watch the spectacle. Although calling it a ‘tent’ was understating things. By its length, the assemblage of canvas and ropes was a marquee and practically an underground assemblage where over one hundred people could gather with ease.

The Slytherins came in second, the Hufflepuffs were third, and of course at last surged the mass of Gryffindors, which outnumbered everybody save the Badgers by a large margin.

“Everyone is here! Excellent! Excellent!” Alexandra had an extreme urge to strike her head against the red material of the tent when Bagman reappeared, in his usual yellow-black robes. Damn it, why was the ex-Beater back? His absence during the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor preliminary had made the day extremely enjoyable...

“This is the last preliminary and I hope you are eager to impress your families, friends, and supporters! We are awaiting over four thousand spectators today!”

Okay, this was beginning to make a respectable audience. Alexandra was ready to give the organisers that. This wouldn’t be the Black Lake with half a dozen bystanders.

“The scene of your exploits will be the dark, the mysterious Forbidden Forest and its fantastic beasts!” The apprehension of many Champions and the gasps must have been quite visible, because Bagman immediately continued his speech in a more conciliating tone. “Don’t worry! The terrain where you will prove your worth has been cut off from the rest of the forest by powerful wards and security teams are constantly on watch to prevent any incident from this direction.”

“The preliminary is an obstacle course,” Bartemius Crouch had arrived, and his strict demeanour was like the night to Bagman’s day. It was also evident from the Director of International Magical Cooperation’s look that he didn’t like the man who had once played for the Wimbourne Wasps. And his voice enumerated the rules and the principles of the preliminary in a non-nonsense voice. “To successfully complete it, and earn points, you have to reach the finish line.”

“That shouldn’t be difficult...” the voice suspiciously sounded like Zacharias Smith. The Ministry official continued like he had not heard anything.

“The obstacle course is divided into ten zones. In each zone, the tamers and experts hired for this preliminary have placed one or several magical beings of the same species.” Crouch’s expression became even stricter and sinister, if it was humanly possible. “Under no circumstance are you to harm them, no matter their status, actions, or behaviour. Is that clear? Many of these species are protected by law or defenceless against the spells of an average student. Removing a feather, a scale, or any piece of the body of the creatures you will be confronted with will result in massive point penalties, and potentially financial ones as well.”

This wasn’t the kind of instructions the Potter Heiress had expected to hear, to be sure.

“How are you going to be graded, you might ask, if the goal is not to fight them?” Bagman took the relay. “Simple! You are going, with your wand, to use all the means at your disposal to change the environment around you to ensure no harm will come to you or the other beings on this course! Charms are authorised, but the judges will grade you on your Transfiguration abilities today!”

Cedric Diggory raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Diggory?”

“Are we all competing together today?”

“Regrettably not,” Bagman seemed genuinely sad at the prospect there wasn’t a round two of the Temple of Plants, “The option was considered, but given the goals and the size of certain zones, it was decided the risk to several animals would be too great and the skills of many potential Champions would be unable to flourish properly. This preliminary will be done by groups of four or five, with ten minutes interludes between each group, the time for the tamers and preliminary’s assessors to ensure every Champion meets the same conditions.”

“The five Ravenclaw Champions will go first,” Bartemius Crouch said, “followed by five Slytherin Champions, then the last four contestants of the House of Slytherin. The Champions of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor’s turn will come next, always in group of four or five. There is no inter-House direct competition in this preliminary. The judges will publish in a few minutes on the boards to your right the exact order of participation.”

Alexandra didn’t know if this could be considered good or bad news...probably the latter. There was no way she could eliminate some Lions and Snakes on her own now.

“We don’t want to lose several hours for a single Champion, so there is a time limit of half an hour for this preliminary,” Ludovic ‘Ludo’ Bagman stated cheerfully. “Oh, and yes, only your wand is authorised, your wand and the objects you will find in the obstacle course. Using anything else like Potions brewed this morning or trying to summon objects from outside the enclosures is grounds for disqualification.”

This was too bad. The green-eyed Ravenclaw was sure summoning her broom in this trial would have allowed her to win in one minute, top.

“Ravenclaw Champions, please advance on the starting line.”

It took far longer than the command implied before they saw the ‘line’. First there were several people who cast spells to verify their wand was the sole magical focus on them today, then there were various wizards and witches who tested if they were under the effect of competition-prohibited substances like Felix Felicis, Polyjuice, or reflex-improving drugs.

They were given several security instructions and the procedures if they wanted to forfeit or demand medical assistance – with the assurance that if they were seriously wounded, the adults waiting outside the zones would intervene no matter what.

And then they left the tent, and between the sun and the cheers of the crowd, it was really a deafening ruckus for a few seconds.

The stands were high, not like in a game of Quidditch, but sufficiently to realise the entire obstacle course was forming a ‘U’ shape, with the starting and finish lines being quite close to each other, and the elevation had to be sufficient to give the spectators a good view of the majority of the preliminary’s zones.

“This is going to be nice...for them,” Roger Davies commented.

“Up Ravenclaw?” Cho asked.

“UP RAVENCLAW!”

Fortunately for the morale, their housemates in the stands did not stay quiet.

“UP RAVENCLAW! UP RAVENCLAW!”

The magical barrier which had prevented them from seeing what was ahead dissipated, allowing them to place a foot on the starting line and revealing a square looking very much like a miniature forest. Oh, and there was an adult Unicorn in the middle of it.

“I hate my life...” The Champion of the Morrigan groaned, as the eyes of the Light animal turned to stare at her. Normally as a girl, Alexandra should have had the advantage over Roger, since the magnificent white equine preferred girls over boys. Except she was Dark, certainly not innocent by any definition of the term – her hands had been stained with blood and she had killed plenty of beasts and humans. The Unicorn was going to go after her, and supreme injustice, she couldn’t even retaliate. “Don’t stay close to me.”

If it was Dumbledore’s meddling, the old wizard would pay for that.

“Alex?”

“Don’t stay close to me, unless you want to test if the Unicorn is reluctant to impale you, Hermione.” Alexandra articulated slowly.

“ON YOU MARK! 3...2...1...GO!”

Alexandra ran. The white cousin of the horse struck the ground with its golden hooves and lowered its head. Formidable, it was going to charge.

“Scalae Lignum!” It was good there were a lot of logs and branches available on the ground. One relatively average spell of Transfiguration was cast, and four mid-sized logs transformed into a relative stable stair. It was a bit too small, but with her physical abilities improved by being a Hydra Animagus, it was going to work.

The Unicorn charged.

Alexandra ran to the stair she had just created and jumped on a main branch of the closest tree, and winced once she was able to look back. The Light creature was incredibly fast; the transfigured pieces of wood were already disintegrated and the horned equine was whinnying loudly. If Unicorns could swear, Alexandra knew this one would insult her on the last five generations of her lineage.

Oh well, time to go before-

The Unicorn rushed to the tree and tried to hammer it with her infernal cloves.

Quickly, Alexandra transfigured many branches into ropes and propelled herself to another tree. And then to another, because her ‘enemy’ seemed really enthusiastic at the idea of impaling her with its long horn of damnation.

“If I see you again outside a task, I will make a roast-beef out of you,” the Champion of the Morrigan told the majestic-looking animal once she landed a couple of feet away from the exit of the first zone. Hermione, Morag and the other two had of course already left it.

Alexandra began to run again. This first obstacle had delayed her for far too long, hopefully there were no other Light creatures among the ‘obstacles’.

The second zone had no Unicorns. It had however the tree-like creatures named Bowtruckles, and Hermione was having a bad experience with them on a tree.

“Leave the trees! They think you’re invading their territory!” Alexandra shouted before casting a weak shield as the green-coloured...were they animals or plants? Well, the Bowtruckles were sending them nuts, fruits, stones, and practically everything they could throw at them.

“Munimenta Terra!” Obviously, she couldn’t afford to create a true rampart of mud and earth, to imprison the agitated Bowtruckles, but even a small solid barrier was going to give them pause. Leaving Hermione behind – her bushy-haired friend was going to lose some hair, but she was not injured, Alexandra sprinted towards the next part of the preliminary, almost catching up with Cho and Morag.

“Did you kill the Unicorn?” asked Morag. “You and she looked like you were going to spend holidays together...”

“Very funny, Heiress MacDougal,” the Basilisk-Slayer retorted. “We will see if you will still laugh in two or three animals when I’m not there to play bait. And be careful with the Ashwinders, no ice or water spells!”

The previous two grounds had been practically unmodified lands from the Forbidden Forest. The third wasn’t. Or maybe it was just the fires who had transformed everything in a field of ashes and embers. And from this grey, fuming landscape, the Ashwinders came. Not just one or two, but dozens of them, and Roger Davies was the ‘attraction’ this time.

“Issss it jusssissouss?”

“Ssssss...weeesss wantsss itsssss...”

Alexandra shook her head. It looked like assimilating so many heads of the Hydra and becoming closer to being a full Animagus had indeed improved her understanding of Parseltongue.

The Potter Heiress hesitated for an instant. One order, and the Ashwinders would bow to her and let all of them progress to the next task. But revealing herself to be a Parselmouth in front of thousands of spectators was sure to give some points to the imbeciles who still believed she was a Dark Lady in-being. Moreover, it would be one fewer trump card everyone would be able to prepare against for the real Tournament.

And Roger wasn’t really in real danger, unlike her against the Unicorn.

“See you later!” the Basilisk-Slayer told the older Ravenclaw and got around before continuing to the next obstacle, Morag and Cho mere meters behind her.

The next animals on her path were Mackled Malaclaws, the crustaceans cursing you with ill-luck if you had the misfortune to be poisoned by them. Since the organisers had created a large pool for them, Alexandra transfigured the big stones lying around into a very, very slim bridge.

It was more exhausting than she had thought. Transfiguration on a large scale cost her much energy, and Alexandra wasn’t really used to it. Another thing she would have to work upon this summer.

At least she was in leading position now, and Cho had just fallen into the water, leaving her with only Morag to contest her first place. Her Irish friend used a similar tunnel transfiguration to avoid the Cornish Pixies in the next section, and the dual combination of Leprechauns-Kneazles – the former throwing gold, the latter becoming crazy at seeing so much wealth around them – passed without incident.

“Naulum!” For the second time, Alexandra was forced to create another stone bridge, not this time to pass over water, but a river of flames where the turtle-like Fire Crabs were spitting fire. In large numbers, the cousins of Smokey weren’t so pretty and innocent-looking as she had taken them.

It was the ninth zone which was real trouble.

“Hippogriffs,” Morag moaned next to her. “Why did it have to be Hippogriffs?”

“Because Keeper of the Keys Hagrid thinks they are beautiful animals?” Alexandra tried.

“We must bow to them, looking them in the eyes before doing so.”

“Morag, I don’t doubt your talent with all sort of fantastical creatures, but these five Hippogriffs don’t look like they are ready to bow.” The head of giant eagles was something difficult to guess the emotions of, but these particular specimens were agitated and distrustful. “Since they have collars and are partially chained, I’m going to try the tree option again.”

“I’m sure this is going to be fine...” seconds later, Morag was forced to run back in a hasty retreat, as the blue-feathered Hippogriff leading the group refused to bow and tried to attack her.

As she was better in Transfiguration and more powerful, Alexandra had a good advance when she entered the last ‘creature park’ of the preliminary. Despite the sound-silencing wards, the green-eyed witch was hearing the crowd cheering and a few muffled comments of Bagman.

All of her attention remained on the last obstacle. An obstacle she had already met in the past.

“I suppose it’s destiny we meet again...Fluffy.”

The gigantic Cerberus barked, and Alexandra had the feeling the six eyes recognised her.

“Sorry, I have no steak with me today, big dog.” Fluffy barked louder, as if to say, ‘no steak, I won’t let you pass’.

Alexandra was still really surprised Dumbledore had been able to obtain the formal authorisation of the judges for this preliminary. A Cerberus was a XXXXX-class creature. One look at the size of its paws and its fangs was enough to have the confirmation of it.

“Harpa Mundus!” The Morrigan’s Champion cast on a log, and seconds later a harp had replaced the piece of wood. Her transfiguration was far from perfect, as when she began to play it, the sound was really, really discordant, but what mattered were the results...and the result was that soon, the Cerberus was sleeping like a pup.

Less than thirty seconds later, Alexandra could reach the finish line, arms raised in triumph above her head, and the roars of the crowd assaulted her ears once more.

“WINNER OF THE RAVENCLAW PRELIMINARIES, MISS ALEXANDRA POTTER IN FOURTEEN MINUTES AND THIRTEEN SECONDS!”

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Finally, the rankings of the Ravenclaw hadn’t been upturned, Daphne mused as she applauded politely while the rest of House Ravenclaw shouted their joy at their House’s victory. Proof that the mood of the public was really fickle, they were cheering a girl none of them had applauded when she was sorted in their House.

But then she wasn’t this treacherous Potter spawn anymore, but the Champion of House Ravenclaw. The score of the last preliminary was leaving no doubt on this subject.

*Alexandra Potter – 92 points*

*Morag MacDougal – 68 points*

*Cho Chang – 62 points*

*Roger Davies – 59 points*

*Hermione Granger – 0 point - forfeit*

The magical screen lit in blue and bronze before giving the final rankings.

*Alexandra Potter – 330 points – Champion, Qualified*

*Roger Davies – 211 points - Qualified*

*Cho Chang – 192 points - Qualified*

*Morag MacDougal – 163 points - Qualified*

*Hermione Granger – 106 points - Qualified*

The final preliminary had not changed much for House Ravenclaw, except switching the fourth and fifth place. For a few minutes, there had been speculation if Morag MacDougal was going to be in the ninety or eighty points, but the red-haired pureblood had been copiously licked by a happy Cerberus, and while she had finished second, her time was only fifty seconds before Chang. Roger Davies had finished last, Hermione Granger having abandoned in front of the Fire Crabs.

“And now,” the Heiress of House Greengrass told her sister next to her, “after the best of what Hogwarts can offer, the worse.”

“It is going to be horrible,” Astoria approved with a large smirk which made her sometimes wonder why her baby sister had been sorted in House Slytherin.

Daphne didn’t find the strength in her to disagree. Tracey and Blaise Zabini were the best students of House Slytherin in this preliminary, and while Pucey and Flint had not ordered them to finish in the last positions this time, the preliminary demanded high skills in Transfiguration and Care of Magical Creatures. The latter was not a problem, but the former was not one of their best classes.

“PLEASE WELCOME WITH ME THE CHAMPIONS OF HOUSE SLYTHERIN! BOLE LUCIAN! CRABBE VINCENT! DAVIS TRACEY! DERRICK PEREGRINE! AND GOYLE GREGORY!”

“Five Sickles none of them pass the Hippogriffs,” Daphne heard Annabeth Blackford bet with Lee Jordan, who in the absence of the Twins seemed to be the official bookmaker of Hogwarts.

“This will not give you a lot of money,” the black-skinned Gryffindor boy informed her.

“Maybe,” agreed the dark-haired girl, “but do you think one of them can find the finish line when they need huge signs to find their way in a Quidditch game?”

“ON YOU MARK! 3...2...1...GO!”

The next minutes were so funny even Daphne laughed and stopped presenting her Slytherin persona. It was just too funny...poor Tracey, to be in the middle of this idiots’ circus.

The Unicorn had proven it was redoubtable by forcing Alexandra Potter into the trees. This time, it amused itself with their housemates. Both Goyle and Crabbe received a light kick in the backside, Derrick was good for Saint Mungo’s, and Bole forfeited in a hurry by sprinting back to the red tent where the starting line waited. Only Tracey managed to fight back...only of course trapped on top of a tree and unable to hex the Unicorn, Daphne knew she was going to lose a lot of points. And in the end, her best friend had to forfeit like the others.

Only four Slytherins remained to save the honour of Slytherin House.

They did better...sort of. Theodore Nott was eliminated by the Unicorn, and Montague failed after the Kneazles knocked him unconscious – the bites of the Malaclaws had certainly played their part in this unlikely turn of events – but Warrington and Zabini managed to reach the finish line.

The Greengrass Heiress was ready to bet the ownership of a large number of magical animals in certain preserves had certainly had its part in this ‘success’.

The two survivors looked absolutely terrible, on the other hand. Compared to them, the Ravenclaws had needed far less time, and they were not injured to this degree.

The positive news in this regard was the fact the judges didn’t need a lot of time to deliberate.

*Cassius Warrington – 40 points*

*Blaise Zabini – 35 points*

*Tracey Davis – -2 points*

“It’s really unfair for Tracey,” her sister commented.

“The judges told us they were going to penalise those who attacked the animals,” Daphne answered neutrally. “But yes, I think it’s unfair too.”

It looked like both Tracey and she would have to rely on invitations of other students or participation in other competitions if they wanted to see the European Magical Tournament with their own eyes. Still, it was hard to regret it. After seeing Tracey’s failure, Daphne didn’t think she would have done better.

*Cassius Warrington – 168 points – Champion, Qualified*

*Graham Montague – 99 points – Qualified*

*Theodore Nott – 98 points – Qualified*

*Blaise Zabini – 75 points – Qualified*

*Lucian Bole – 46 points – Qualified*

*Tracey Davis – 44 points*

*Peregrine Derrick – 14 points*

*Vincent Crabbe – 1 point*

*Gregory Goyle – 1 point*

“Not counting Zabini, it is likely the worst team it was possible to muster...”

“Nah,” Blackford turned to her as she counted the Sickles she had won. “The worst team would have been selecting Malfoy and his two trolls.”

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Neville was not impatient...but he cheered like the other Champions when the scores of the Hufflepuffs arrived in the tent.

*Cedric Diggory – 273 points – Champion, Qualified*

*Malcolm Preece – 135 points – Qualified*

*Tamsin Applebee – 124 points – Qualified*

*Eurig Cadwallader – 73 points – Qualified*

*Susan Bones – 71 points – Qualified*

*Ernest Macmillan – 70 points*

*Herbert Fleet – 58 points*

*Heidi Macavoy – 41 points*

*Wayne Hopkins – 30 points*

*Luke Cholderton – 29 points*

Moments later, the words he had been waiting the last couple of hours to hear were mercifully uttered.

“The next champions called to the starting line are: Mr. Neville Longbottom, Mr. George Weasley, Ms Katie Bell, Mr. Cormac McLaggen, and Ms Fiona Belmont.”

“George, NO!” Fred sobbed in a tone that was so lamentable no one took it seriously.

“Fred, what I am going to do without you?” replied the other twin, though Merlin only knew if it was George or Fred.

“I will pray to the Gods of Pranking for your salvation,” sobbed ‘Fred’, under the amused eyes of the foreign wizards observing them. The adults who obeyed Crouch’s orders were not smiling. Perhaps proximity with the Director had destroyed their humour?

They spent what felt like ten hours encircled by officials and experts, detailing them everything they had the right to do and what was absolutely forbidden – certain things looked like they were a consequence of any of the three other Houses having passed before them.

They entered the preliminary’s obstacle course under loud cheers and massive applauses.

Neville felt suddenly very nervous. There had been more spectators at the last preliminary, but there was far more of them today, and everything promised to be more important in the future Tournament. It was nothing like a game for the Quidditch Cup...

“ON YOU MARK! 3...2...1...GO!”

The Unicorn, yes a real Unicorn, immediately targeted George. Maybe the superb animal had been pranked by the Twins during one of their regular – and clearly illegal – visits to the Forbidden Forest?

Neville hesitated a second before deciding the older Weasley was resourceful enough to survive on his own and he began to run towards the exit, abandoning Ron’s brother to his fate. The Bowtruckles right after weren’t a problem; the Boy-Who-Lived had weeks ago learned in a book a jinx which generated a small illusion of fire, and it was enough for the tiny tree-things to flee him.

The third section was strange. The world began to oscillate in a sea of grey and light.

Neville saw a massive dark snake hissing at him. He didn’t recognise the species. All he felt was that the huge snake was wrong, *wrong*, **wrong**.

“*Neville Longbottom*,” hissed something he had prayed to never hear again and his scar began to hurt. “*Do you see what I have become? Do you see how I survive*?”

“*You’re not real*,” Neville shouted. “*You can’t be here*!”

There were dozens of Aurors around the stands, and dozens of security wizards for the preliminary itself. Professor Dumbledore and McGonagall were here too! He couldn’t be here! It was impossible!

“*I am going to take your body and destroy everything you care for*,” the snake hissed, the hated red eyes of the Dark Lord shining with malice. “*I will reign again, more terrible than ever*!”

“*NEVER*!”

A blade of light materialised in his hands, and Neville struck. The snake was decapitated. The wraith-thing which had fled after Quirrell burned escaped the snake’s corpse and shrieked as it was forced to flee a second time.

There was a hateful whisper.

“**You will not be always so lucky, Champion of Fate**.”

And then the world returned to normal, like it had always been a dream. There was no white unnatural world, no huge snake’s corpse. Neville was in the middle of a large group of Ashwinders, and suffered mild burns before arriving to the exit. But he still felt like he had passed some test, like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Neville ran like hell, jumping over the crumbling bridges the previous Champions had built, dispersing the Pixies with some prank spells, and turning the gold of the Leprechauns into mud, extinguishing as many flames of the Fire Crabs as possible, and doing a lot of bows to the Hippogriffs before meeting Fluffy once more and repairing a few musical instruments before finding one which placed the three-headed pet of Hagrid in a sleepy mood.

Neville passed the finishing line in first position, and he could only smile when Ludo Bagman announced his time. If this didn’t give him a good score, the Longbottom scion didn’t know what would!

The feeling of triumph ceased rapidly when his eyes fell on Potter sitting with the other Ravenclaws. When he had seen her leave the red tent this morning, there had been nothing usual about the Ravenclaw green-eyed girl, but now what Neville saw was utterly terrifying.

Her body was shrouded in darkness, and in this cloak of obscurity scaly things were crawling and appearing randomly.

A voice of woman sounding like his mother began to speak in his head.

“**She is the Champion of Death**.”

And Neville knew beyond doubt as the eyes of the colour of the Killing Curse focused on him, Alexandra Potter knew what he had become too.

Suddenly, the Boy-Who-Lived was in no mood to celebrate his victory...

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It was very late in the evening when the owner of the enchanted mirror he had ordered a House Elf to carry to his office deigned answering him.

“Did you know my student was going to become a Champion of Fate?” the Defeater of Grindelwald asked once the salutations were out of the way.

“We did not,” answered the Light wizard whose white cloak hid most of his appearance. “Fate was not supposed to touch your protégé until the defeat of your local Dark Lord was imminent, in three to four years.”

“Evidently, this has changed.”

“Evidently,” replied in accented English the wizard professing to be his ally. “The Exchequer’s leadership has accelerated its plans. Whatever they have planned, they want Voldemort out of the way first. You can’t use a Prophecy if it is already fulfilled.”

The silver-bearded Headmaster didn’t grit his teeth in frustration.

“I will protect Neville until he is ready to destroy the Dark on his own.”

“Good,” the white figure approved. “The issue of him not being one of the titular Champions may be turned to our advantage when our enemies will make their move. And the Boy-Who-Lived will be an important political asset we will be able to play by November.”

“As you say. Next contact?”

“In one week. The operations will be over one way or another by then. Good Night.”

And the enchanted mirror returned to normal, giving no clue it was anything but a conventional, ‘normal’ wizard’s mirror.

Dumbledore’s eyes were drawn again to a list of names lying right in front of him.

*Geoffrey Hooper – 195 points – Champion, Qualified*

*Neville Longbottom – 193 points – Qualified*

*Angelina Johnson – 186 points – Qualified*

*Leo Black – 131 points – Qualified*

*Ronald Weasley – 125 points – Qualified*

*Fred Weasley – 124 points*

*George Weasley – 124 points*

*Katie Bell – 91 points*

*Alicia Spinnet – 87 points*

*Kenneth Towler – 69 points*

*Fiona Belmont – 67 points*

*Dean Thomas – 27 points*

*Cormac McLaggen – 23 points*

“How strange are the games of Fate, Fawkes,” Albus Dumbledore whispered, before abandoning the parchment and his office to return to the Great Hall.

**1 May 1994, somewhere in Ireland**

“Fate is a bitch.”

Morag MacDougal chuckled.

“Yes, I have to admit that when it changed the scales, it didn’t do it half-way. It wasn’t discreet for Longbottom, but Longbottom, Black, and Weasley?”

The first had been expected to be among the five Lions who were going to be sent to the Venetian school before the last preliminary, but the last two certainly weren’t.

“At least it was nice enough to give us the warning beforehand,” Alexandra huffed theatrically. “We will see if Johnson and Hooper are on our side, but I don’t have great hopes after this succession of miracles engineered by the so pure and noble Power of Light.”

“That leaves Hufflepuff, and your girlfriend was kind enough to make an exploit at the critical moment.”

The Champion of the Morrigan stuck her tongue at her. How mature.

“The contingencies are ready. If the Army of Light comes here, they really have a Seer on their side.”

“Good,” scales began to replace skin on Alexandra’s arms. “Let’s make sure that this Beltane will not proceed according to our enemies’ plans.”

**Author’s note**: The preliminaries are over, and the Hogwarts Champions are decided. All is ready for the European Magical Tournament...though now there is a deadly night of Beltane to survive.

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