**Chapter 61**

**Blood and Family**

**1 November 1993, Murano Island, Republic of Magical Venice**

The first second was pure, undiluted agony.

The next instants were worse.

She screamed. She screamed and something in her throat became intolerably painful.

The pain increased. Her surroundings were troubled.

Why was there so much pain?

She was feeling every part of her body, from her ears to the tips of her fingers. And everything was pain. Everything was agony.

Suddenly the agony disappeared and something arrived in her field of vision. It was big, it was moving, and it was loud.

It smelled delicious.

Her body moved before her brain had the time to assimilate all the information. By the time she had realised that the thing in front of her was in fact a fat, bald human, she had her teeth planted in his throat and was drinking his blood voraciously.

She should have felt bad. She should have stopped.

She wanted more.

She received more. It took long seconds to drain the man of his blood and his life, but when she let him fall on the ground there was another man crawling by a sort of cage-door.

She wanted to tell him to run. She wanted to spare him. She seized him and began to tear his throat apart at an inhuman speed. Another life extinguished, but the raging pain in her lungs and her throat diminished.

By the fourth victim thrown into the room and killed, she had regained enough clarity and control over her body to stand and examine the location where she had returned to consciousness.

But there was not much to see. The walls were old and the shade of the stone brought no memories. There was a circle of Runes that looked like a combination of Aztec, Sumerian, and Norse combinations. The half-destroyed Portraits of Ruin she had spent dozens of hours on were above the two possible exits to the door. There was no magic emanating from them. They had fulfilled their purpose and been destroyed in the process.

The fifth man being thrown into the room interrupted her chain of thoughts for several seconds. When his corpse was thrown away, she began to examine her body. Outwardly, she appeared about the same height and weight. Inside, everything was different. She couldn’t hear her heart beat. She couldn’t hear her heart! And coupled with the unnatural thirst, her new willingness to drink the blood of humans, her inhuman speed, and the heightened senses, she knew what she had become.

A blood-sucking predator. A vampire.

It should have scared her. But she felt nothing. She just felt...empty.

After her eighth victim, the thirst, the agony, the pain...most of it was under her control and she could walk around the room and examine the ivory shade her new body had been given. There was no light, not even a candle to illuminate the darkness, but she could observe the room like the sun was at its zenith.

“The hunger is under control.” Her voice was incredibly different to her ears. She was pretty sure she had never spoken like that before...before she died.

The suspicion – or was it animal instinct – that she was watched from some invisible gallery was correct. A couple of seconds later, the cage-gate closed and the door next to it opened.

The two mages in dark blue robes to lead the procession were unknown to her in visage or smell. Strangely, she felt no urge to drink their blood. Ah, Animagi. One was like a wolf, and the other...jaguar, she was tempted to say. It was a big feline, anyway.

If they were unknown quantities to pass the door, the woman coming next absolutely wasn’t.

In a brisk moment, her senses screamed in alarm and something like blood, darkness, and lust could be tasted.

On this occasion, the female being she had agreed to be the Apprentice to had abandoned the illusion of humanity she chose to show to the public. Her skin was like onyx bathed in flames. Her hair was of a pure crimson colour. The claws and the talons were visible...the rest, not so much, for there was a long blue robe to hide the view.

Seeing the dark magic flow like a torrent in and out of the body, Angelica Sforza could not be mistaken as anything but a Succubus.

“Welcome back to the world of the living, Apprentice.”

“Thank you, Mistress.” Another time, she could have ‘forgotten’ the last word, but there were two other mages in the room-prison, and the semi-insolence she had liked to practise...before...was not a good idea in the current circumstances.

There were two questions now. Because everything she had felt and acted upon in the Portraits of Ruin were...foggy and indistinct.

“How long did my mind and soul stay in the Portraits? Where is my daughter?”

The shining, irisless red eyes fixed her for a few seconds before answering.

“You died on November 5, 1981. We are in one of my bases on an island close to Venice and today the date is November 1, 1993. You were dead to the world for the next best thing to twelve years.”

The new fangs in her mouth clacked under her anger.

“You abandoned me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Apprentice,” the two male wizards left the room, leaving her alone with the Knight of the Exchequer. “I invested a lot of effort and hours into teaching you. But keeping the last two Portraits of Ruin you were working on in your home was just stupid. By the time I arrived at Godric’s Hollow, the surviving Death Eater squads specialised in the looting and pillaging of Wizarding homes had already taken them.”

“Surely they would have sensed the latent magic,” even if a lot of them were thugs, the supporters of Voldemort weren’t all that stupid.

“You give them far too much credit.” The Succubus searched in her pocket an instant before drawing from it a wand. “We will have to go to our wand-maker for something appropriate, but it will do for one or two days.”

The wand was offered to her. She didn’t move forwards to take it.

“If you weren’t able to track them after the problems they caused at Godric’s Hollow, how did you find the two paintings in the end?”

“Your daughter.” Of all the answers she had thought about, this one wasn’t even in the first hundred. “I certainly didn’t know that the symbiotic trigger when a Champion of Death is chosen could activate heirlooms across the world. It’s always refreshing to learn something new.”

“My daughter...is she?”

“The Queen met her a few hours ago. She should be back at Hogwarts as we speak.”

“I...I didn’t want her to be involved in your organisation.” And meeting the Queen at...thirteen years old. Powers, it was far too young...

“I respected your wishes, Lily. I didn’t interfere in Britain to take her guardianship...though I suspect she would have had a far happier childhood if I had. From the reports I was given two years ago, Vernon and Petunia Dursley are the kind of human beings pure-blood extremists love to point out to justify their killings.”

Angelica raised her hand and an orb materialised, showing the picture of a tenable girl with bright green eyes and long dark hair. Suddenly, she felt pain again and it was not from being in a new body or the thirst for blood. It was her daughter...the daughter she had unwittingly abandoned.

“What was she doing with the Dursleys?” the Apprentice-Enchantress forced herself to snarl, before realising that yes, vampires could cry. “I explicitly told every member of the Order of the Phoenix I was friend with that I would never let my sister raise any children save her precious son if there was another family living on earth.”

“I couldn’t exactly ask myself, you understand, but...with the Longbottoms dead, Sirius Black abandoning his godfather obligations, and most of the sheep convinced your husband was a traitor who deserved to rot at Azkaban...”

The pieces of the puzzle connected and one name came to the fore.

“Dumbledore.”

“Possibly,” her Mistress said before amending her words when Lily stared. “Certainly.”

She took the wand, and gave a few twirls, creating several green sparks.

“Nothing...”

“...will be the same as before? No, it won’t,” the Sforza witch finished.

“My allegiance is to my daughter. Don’t ask me to choose between her and you.”

Angelica laughed, in one of the lustful purrs the Succubae were so infamous for.

“Apprentice, if the Exchequer took habit to using a daughter against her mother, I can assure you, our organisation wouldn’t have lasted a few decades, never mind centuries or millennia. I will not try to create tensions between the two of you...but you and I have an Apprenticeship contract. And you will respect it. Am. I. Clear?”

“Perfectly clear.” The darkness had soaked the last words and Lily was not going to challenge her.

“Good,” Angelica commented before huffing. “Don’t believe I’m unsympathetic. You will be able to see your daughter soon...assuming you learn to control your bloodthirst. The Winter Ball is not the best place to test your self-control, but I will contact Stella Zabini. Maybe we can arrange something over the end-of-the-year holidays...”

“Stella Zabini is her new guardian? Stella?” Sure, she had asked her to watch over her daughter should everything else fail, but the older woman had not been exactly a friend or anyone she had been particularly close to.

“It looks like your performance in the Black Widow’s bed was sufficient to earn you this favour,” the tone was measured, but Lily was now sure she was going to be the subject of many, many jokes in certain circles. “Now let’s leave this cold room. I am a Headmistress with a busy schedule, Apprentice...”

**1 November 1993, Beauxbatons, France**

“I didn’t need your help, Henri.”

It was a good thing, thought Henri de Condé, he hadn’t done this for a storm of congratulations, a large smile, or a kiss, because it looked like he was clearly going to receive none of the three.

“If you say so,” the sixteen years-old teenage boy answered with his Occlumency shields raised to the maximum. “Could you please control your Aura a bit? Your power is leaking across the entire corridor...”

Fleur Delacour sent him a nasty glare and it took over twenty seconds before she really made an effort to lower the pressure. Had it been anyone else attracted to women, it was likely said person would have been naked and trying to manhandle the French Heiress. Veela Aura required unbreakable mental fortitude, a monstrous magical core, or a developed talent in the Mind Arts. Apart from the Light origin of the power, it was virtually impossible to distinguish from the Succubus Aura, used by the Dark cousins of the Veela covens.

“Thank you,” he affirmed once he didn’t risk kissing the ground where Delacour had walked if he lowered his Occlumency shields.

Fleur Delacour’s visage twitched as if she deliberated with a voice in her head whether to strangle or kill him. And knowing she was now the Champion of Life in its Aspect of Archangel Michael, it was far from impossible that was the case.

Powers of Light and Dark, what evil had he recently done to be forced to share Champion duties with this bitch?

“It would be...appreciable if you revealed to me why I had to break a variant of the Imperius before you entered Dorm 2.”

“That isn’t any of your concern, Henri!” the platinum-haired girl snapped back.

And how the other Champions of the Light were chosen in their Roles wasn’t any of his business, normally. But listening to this half-Veela, it was a guarantee her Power had not chosen her for her humility and her gentleness.

“I was just checking you hadn’t done something particularly stupid which was going to make the headlines tomorrow,” the Condé Heir added like he had not heard the last sentence.

“I will repeat. That does not concern you, Champion of Horus.” The behaviour and the shaking of her hands suggested it was going to make the headlines, but perhaps not in France. He was going to have to buy the main newspapers across Europe for two or three days, then.

“The Army of Light will deal with the problem. The Trinity can continue to search across dusty old libraries for their providential spells.”

After that, he was sure the Falcon Power he was sworn to would have understood if he stayed idle and watched while the arrogant girl started an orgy in the boys’ dorm. Not only would some of his year-mates have owed him one, but perhaps the total ruin of Fleur Delacour’s reputation would have done wonders for her arrogance.

But what was done was done, and now, like the expression said, you had to reap what you sowed.

Henri gave an exaggerated look at his watch.

“It was an excellent moment, my dear Lady, but I have other things to do with my time. I will remind you the girl dorms are in the southern wing,” Fleur’s face reddened and her blue eyes promised an extremely painful death, “and I bid you good day.”

He had not walked ten steps before Delacour called out to him.

“Wait!”

“Yes?” He demanded idly.

“You were wrong,” the daughter of the French Minister articulated.

“I’m afraid you will have to be more precise than that,” Henri advised. “I’m wrong about a lot of things, including the choice of meals at the Asiatic restaurants I’m invited to.”

“You were wrong about Alexandra Potter. She’s a monster in league with the Exchequer.”

And just like that, Henri de Condé knew where Fleur Delacour and her Light execution force had gone last evening. He also knew the outcome had been a one-sided defeat now. You didn’t come back under the Imperius if it had been a victory or a draw.

Yes, reading the English newspapers of today and tomorrow was going to be very interesting reading.

There was one thing to say before going on to make this arrangement, however. Something that had to be absolutely said to a witch suicidal enough to go Dark Witch-hunting when the Dark was in the ascendant and the target had proven XXXXX-class monsters were no match for her.

“You are an idiot, Fleur Delacour.”

**1 November 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

For the first time, they all met in their headquarters. And all really meant ‘all’. Every member of the Exiled was there, plus the associates, the outliers, the half-allies, and the people which were somehow trusted not to go babbling to Dumbledore.

What was the expression? Ah yes, in dark times, exceptional measures.

From Ravenclaw, there was Morag, Hermione, Nigel, Luna, Cho Chang, Penelope Clearwater, and herself. From Hufflepuff, Susan and Hannah Abbot were there. Slytherin was represented by Lyre, Daphne Greengrass, Tracey Davis, and Blaise Zabini. Gryffindor had Fred, George, and Ginny, who for the occasion was appearing in her persona of Scylla Yaxley. Two House Elves loyal to them were mounting guard close to the door, and over two hundred more privacy charms had been cast.

The ambiance was not triumphant. Some Gryffindors may be partying at the idea that Grindelwald was dead, but after seeing half of Hogsmeade burned down and the general answer to the attack, nobody in this room had the intention of organising celebrations. One dead for the Light and one for the Dark did not make a victory.

Yesterday had been a defeat, and not a particularly close one.

“So Hogwarts was built on the site of the battle of Camlann,” Cho Chang commented after Alexandra had finished relaying the information she had been made privy to. By all rights, the older Ravenclaw should not have been invited, but Morag had told her the girl had tried to turn back and search for her in the middle of Hogsmeade. How much was the life-debt and how much was a genuine desire to help her was a good question, but Cho had only retreated when Professor McGonagall had ordered her to run to the castle. “I certainly didn’t see that coming.”

“In hindsight, we should have,” Fred affirmed in a low voice. It was somewhat sinister when the red-haired twins didn’t show their cheerful faces, and today was no exception. “The Forbidden Forest grows and welcomes all sorts of Dark Creatures because the ground is soaked in Dark-based magic. The Black Lake has stood for centuries yet there is no sign of any river arriving to it. And the region is isolated, more likely because it was chosen to be away from prying eyes during a time when magic had not yet been subjected to the Statute of Secrecy. Yes, Hogwarts being once upon a time called Camlann makes too much sense.”

“The Founders were certainly part of the next generation which came after that battle,” Daphne Greengrass proposed.

“Or they were some of the survivors who fled for their lives as the sky burned and everyone died,” Morag said in a bitter voice. “The Basilisks of Salazar Slytherin were certainly a part of his arsenal during the final battle. These two survived while the rest fell against Excalibur...”

The boys and girls seated on the couch and the chairs contemplated for long seconds what the charge of multiple Basilisks on a battlefield would do. Terror did not even begin to describe the scene. Alexandra knew that both fights against the Basilisk could very well have ended with her death, and she had fought the monsters on a terrain which was in the end largely favourable for her. On an open battlefield, with thousands of enemies clashing and killing, and the Basilisks trying to use their killing gazes, the carnage did not bear thinking about.

“One of the questions I have is what sort of beast they imprisoned in the foundations of Hogwarts,” Scylla-Ginny spoke.

Alexandra shrugged.

“I only saw the memory of the fallen, and I didn’t stay hours there to watch the battlefield.” The Potter Heiress grimaced. “But given the destruction and the number of dead, it had to be something incredibly tough and dangerous. The Basilisks were almost certainly used to petrify it with their cursed eyes, and since the magic of the creature fuels Hogwarts...”

“Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus,” Luna murmured.

“Come on, Lovegood!” Tracey quipped. How the excited girl had been sorted into Slytherin was a mystery for the ages. “Never tickle a sleeping dragon, all right. The Hogwarts’ motto is just...a...”

The horrified expression of the Slytherin girl made very clear the motto was maybe not as preposterous as everyone thought.

“It can’t be a dragon,” Susan intervened, and Alexandra could not help but fix her gaze upon the lips and the eyes of her girlfriend. “The Horntail and Ironbelly breeds do not generate enough magic to replace a Ley line. They do not live long enough either.”

“Those are the great dragon breeds of our time,” Blaise revealed. “But I listened to mother babble for endless hours on dragons, and a lot of breeds went extinct long before the Statute was voted into effect. It’s possible the Founders captured one of the last specimens after Camlann...”

“Dragons rarely stop growing from the moment they hatch out of their mother’s egg,” Nigel spoke, clearly ill at the very idea. “And it must have stayed here over a thousand years...”

For half a minute, words failed everyone. Lyre was the first to find her train of thoughts again.

“Alex...should it become necessary...do you think you could kill the dragon?”

There was only one answer for that.

“No, I can’t.” It was possible they were wrong about what was buried under their feet, but the hisses of the hydra and the bad feeling in her stomach were telling her they were right. “In fact, I think I had a better chance challenging Grindelwald, the Light Lord and the Knight Priest together yesterday...at least they are humans...humanoids...well they have one head, two arms, and two legs. I’m sure that as long as I avoid the attacks and stab them enough times with Fragarach, it’s possible there’s a small chance of victory.”

It was a very weak chance, needless to say, but it was a chance out of a million. Whereas the dragon...

“Whatever venom I coat Fragarach in, my sword need to pierce the skin and connect with the blood of a human or a beast to work. Dragon scales are already one of the toughest magical protections known to wizardkind. If it wasn’t, no one would wear a suit of dragon scales. But whatever difficulty I would have against a Welsh Green or a Horntail, this would be nothing against a thousand-year-old dragon. And I have to assume that it’s more dangerous than two Basilisks put together. In other words, the moment it sees me coming, it’s going to open its maw and try to roast me.”

The young Ravenclaw shook her head.

“I’m not immune to fire, and there are things you can’t evade more than once. The dragon would kill me in mere minutes...if I’m lucky.”

“Oh, surely not...you’re our Dark Lady!” Fred’s joke did not make her chuckle this time. The red-haired Gryffindor pouted before his twin spoke.

“I don’t think there’s a lot we can do about this news. I mean, yes Hogwarts was built at Camlann, and yes there’s probably a big bad dragon sleeping in the foundations of the school, but this was true for the last thousand years. The big problem is the threat of...Morgana La Fay. Do you think she was bluffing, Alexandra?”

“I hadn’t that impression,” she tried very hard not to remember the exchange. “But since her organisation was the one to break out Grindelwald and it was their ‘Knight Priest’ who walked away yesterday...they have at least one Necromancer, one Dark Mage, and one immortal witch turned Lady Vampire to lead their troops on the battlefield. They will more likely than not have tens of thousands of Inferi and hundreds of skinchangers to breach the outer defences. Against that, Hogwarts will be defended by...let’s say five hundred students and forty teachers?”

“It is generous,” Penelope Clearwater said. The blonde Prefect was livid, but her analytical mind of Ravenclaw was turning at full speed. “Many Professors, Trelawney and Binns to not name a few, are useless. And we do not have five hundred students. But assuming we had them, half of the children would not know how to cast something more dangerous than a Stupefy. The useless DADA Professors have been a plague on our education.”

In more ways than one, Alexandra reflected. The Queen of the Exchequer had known too much about her, and that meant one of the Professors was a Traitor. Given the past experience, guess who was her first suspect?

“We can’t win against them,” Hermione said quietly. “If they were Death Eaters, they would have to rely on one or two Lord-level Dark Wizards and an army of adult Crabbes and Goyles with some Dark creatures. But the Exchequer...their Knights are Dark Lords...or Dark Ladies. If they attack...”

“There will be no final battle.” Alexandra agreed. “There will be a final massacre.”

“Our contingencies may slow them a bit,” Lyre protested. “Since everything happened at Hogsmeade, we weren’t able to activate them.”

“The contingencies were supposed to delay an enemy superior in numbers and magical power.” As funny at it had been to plant exotic seeds next to the walls, Contingency Ent had never been about stopping wave after wave of Inferi in their tracks.

“I really, really wish yesterday had never happened,” Hannah Abbot confessed. “Dark Wizards...Light Wizards...dragons...monsters...Morgana La Fay...this sounds like one of the books about the Boy-Who-Lived, but an adult version and without the happy ending.”

The judgement of Susan’s friend was, unfortunately, bringing plenty of good points to the table.

“And here I was thinking the European Tournament was a formidable opportunity,” Cho admitted. “It’s just a giant trap, in the end.”

“To make a convincing trap, it takes good bait and good advertisement,” Hermione remarked. “Who’s the main target in your opinion? Professor Dumbledore?”

“It certainly fits,” Daphne voiced in her ‘Ice Queen’ persona. “For decades, Albus Dumbledore has been the Headmaster of Hogwarts and many wizards and witches, including some in the Board of Governors,” the words ‘my father’ were not uttered, but everyone heard them nonetheless, “are making less and less difference between the reputation of Dumbledore and the reputation of Hogwarts. And now he has beaten Grindelwald for the second time, triumphing over his old enemy and restoring peace to Europe, winning the one million Galleon prize, the adoration of the crowd, and etc, etc...”

Even Vincent Crabbe would have been able to take the hint.

“For an outsider, it will look like he’s not out of the game, that he’s regaining power and influence,” Nigel said with a frown. “But in reality...”

“In reality, he’s rushing headfirst into a trap.” Susan ended the tirade. “And since we are the students of his school, we are by default included in a game where we don’t know the first thing about the rules. He’s leading us to the slaughterhouse and we have no choice but to follow.”

“There’s always a choice,” Alexandra was forced to open her mouth at this one. If there was anything she had learned in two and a half years of magical education, it was this fact. “There are things more powerful than us. There are politics, there are conspiracies and machinations, but in the end, it’s always our choice.”

“Our Dark Lady is a big believer in free will,” George gasped mockingly.

“The Dark is always a supporter of free will,” the Heiress of House Greengrass voiced. “You might do evil with Dark rituals, but you will do them with your own will, your own ambition, and your own emotions.”

Something passed through the blue eyes of the blonde pureblood, and if Alexandra was correct, it was resignation.

“Stringent Secrecy Oath on this enchanted parchment or not,” the runic document she had poured her magic into with Hermione’s knowledge was definitely doing what she had promised. Anyone who tried to violate their word would have a lot of reasons to regret their mistake in the next days. “We are taking huge risks by just talking to you. Dumbledore could easily give you to the Ministry...”

“He could try.”

The more she learned about Azkaban and the farce of justice the Ministry organised during its judicial procedures, the more Alexandra had sworn she would never let herself be arrested.

“But I think he’s going to have a lot to do in the next weeks before dealing with me.”

And frankly, her chances weren’t that bad. The Aurors were, with a few rare exceptions, pathetic. Not to mention they always arrived hours late to the battlefield.

Dumbledore was immensely powerful, yes, but he was one man and if she impaled him on Fragarach, the old Light Lord would die like every other man.

“I don’t know what awaits us in the future,” the Potter Heiress admitted. “I am sure however that Dumbledore’s grand plan for an international tournament has already horribly backfired. Judging by his record of the last two and a half years, the goals of the Dark Wizards where he is concerned must be close to completion.”

“He is the Leader of the Light,” Hannah said in a voice which sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

“And Light does not mean Good,” Morag continued. “I think the attackers yesterday proved that beyond doubt.”

When the Ministry declared both the Army of Light and the Exchequer terrorist organisations, and membership in them punishable by life imprisonment at Azkaban, it was difficult for the average wizard to know the difference between the two.

There were more seconds of silence after this. More sentences unsaid. More scenarios imagined and immediately discarded. Running, as tempting as it was, would be only a short reprieve and would not make them powerful enough to endure the hurricane coming on the horizon.

“So,” demanded Cho Chang,” what are your orders, Lightning Queen?”

“Don’t call me that,” Alexandra said while trying not to grimace. She did not regret the deaths of the Light mages; these bastards had tried to kill her, after all. But the sight of people being killed by her lightning spells was not something she liked to remember. “And I don’t want to give orders. Some of you are my friends, some are,” her gaze fell on the two smirking twins, “business-partners, and some are school associates. But I am not a tyrant. I do not wear any crown, and I don’t want to change this any time soon.”

“Your suggestions, then,” Tracey Davis spoke.

“Train a lot. Survive. The oncoming Tournament is a trap but no plan in history has ever been foolproof.”

“Much as I hate to say it,” Blaise said with a reluctance which was rarely shown on his face, “winning the Tournament is perhaps our best-case scenario as we speak. Optimistically, it would allow us to discover whatever the Exchequer has planned and stop it for good. If on the other hand we fail, we will have bought one year of preparations and survival contingencies. That’s three hundred and sixty-five days to become more powerful and to prepare for the worst.”

“It remains a very dangerous gamble,” Hermione said after biting her lower lip. “The Exchequer aside, the other Champions participating in the Tournament will likely be the toughest and the brightest of their schools. Lyudmila Romanov for Durmstrang and the Chaos. Fleur Delacour for Beauxbatons and the Light. And those are just the two we are aware of.”

“So we will need to bring the best and risk everything,” Cho commented. “What? It’s like the Quidditch Cup’s games all over again. We are forced to bet everything on seven players for the honour of the House.”

“The wrackspurts are all over the place,” Luna commented.

Most people chose to pretend nothing had been uttered in the previous seconds.

“For all the plots under the shiny painting, I think any potential underage Champion will need the permission of his or her magical guardian to participate,” the Ice Queen of House Slytherin introduced one more difficulty. “Ideally, who would we choose in this Tournament?”

“Ideally, it would be Cho or me for House Ravenclaw,” the raven-haired third year replied. “Fred or George would be excellent choices for Gryffindor...”

“Thank you, Frau General!” the two shouted in an impeccable chorus and parody of military salutes.

“Susan is a safe choice for Hufflepuff, and Tracey would be the Champion of Slytherin.”

“It will not work,” her girlfriend instantly made her proposal collapse. “Two-thirds of our House are ready to propose Cedric Diggory, and let’s face it, he has two years of education on us...”

“He is also so dreamy...” The Abbot Heiress’ eyes showed a disturbing amount of admiration.

“All his sex-appeal won’t be exactly useful in the middle of a spell battle,” George retorted, evidently a bit annoyed.

“And since I am a half-blood, Slytherin will accept me only if there is no other choice,” Tracey warned unhappily. “Warrington and Montague are sufficiently pumped with arrogance to put their names into the contest...”

“Formidable, really formidable,” Alexandra had the urge to strike the table with her head. But it was not going to resolve anything and she just placed her head in her hands. “This is going to be bloody chaos, and we don’t even know the qualifications the judges will use to select the Champions...”

**1 November 1993, Gringotts, London**

“Our...rebellion...has not been the triumph we expected with our battle-prayers.”

The quiet admission was a model of understatement from the young goblin missing part of his left arm.

It was also delivered in the main hall, which could very well use some renovation funds after the battle which had taken place yesterday.

Grimjaw was very happy he had been working in the deeper vaults during these events, because it looked like the situation had been...lively.

The long counters the accountants and bankers used every day had been smashed apart and incinerated, sometimes with one of the goblins using it still at it. One in five marble pillars had been disintegrated or showed heavy damage. The other pillars were covered in smoke and had clearly been subjected to massive amounts of fire spells.

The large golden clock which had given the hour for the last two hundred years had melted under the intensity of the fires and the wand-wielders’ incantations. About eighty percent of the rest of the gold ornaments and top of the columns were showing similar decrepit and damaged status. The windows had all been blown apart, without exception. The busts of famous goblin leaders and bankers, visionary figures worthy of being entered into the annals of Gringotts, had been wrecked and demolished with Blasting Charms.

The hall smelled like Death itself. Between the corpses of goblins and the smell the magical fires had left in the air, the ventilation efforts were tripled and it still wasn’t enough, even when half of the warriors’ remains had already been removed to be thrown into the dragon pits.

“At least Cuthbert Mockridge is dead. That’s a progress, right?” the brain-dead youngster who had dared to make the observation got smacked in the back of the head for having the temerity to state this observation.

“The Ministry always find more idiots like Mockridge. They are like vermin, they crawl out of the Wizarding homes every time there’s a high position freed by the removal of a Ministry appointee...”

Yes, Grimjaw had to approve that one. Stupidity was obviously contagious among the humans, and the more their blood was ‘pure’ and their vaults full, the more easily they succumbed to this ‘epidemic’.

“What I want to know,” a large warrior that Grimjaw didn’t recognise sneered, “is the name of the dung-eater who thought it was a good idea to point your halberds in the direction of the Butcher of Dresden!”

The party of five or so goblins who had survived the initial attack looked at each other. They were young warriors, and for two of them, Grimjaw was sure yesterday should have been their first blooding.

“It was Surtang, Accountant!”

“Traitor!” barked the aforementioned Surtang, trying to swing his halberd to decapitate the comrade who had just denounced him. “Traitor and liar! It was your idea!”

The senior guards stopped the fight before it came to blood.

“Your lines will pay the price for this grave error of judgement!” This was not much a threat as it was a promise. “Surtang and Clawdite, to the Erumpent pens! Their three companions, to the Firecrab farms!”

Now that was cruel. It was cruel and vicious, if one wanted to be perfectly accurate. Firecrab farms were hot rooms where multiple fires were burning permanently, and it was in general thought to be an easy duty...unless like these young hot-blooded warriors you had been bathed in cursed fire for the better part of the last night. Going back near flames so soon after this defeat was sure to traumatise them for several months.

As for the Erumpent duties, that was one of the sections which always had to search for ‘volunteers’. As every fluid coming out of an Erumpent was an explosive substance or a corrosive one, the lack of dedication was obvious. The two main culprits were not going to live long to regret their mistakes.

“The auditions to replace the accountants dead in the pursuit of their duties will be opened tomorrow at 9 o’clock sharp. The propositions for the guards’ duelling promotions will be...”

Grimjaw turned around and began to walk back to his office. They had evidently lost this round of fighting, and he would learn more by reading the reports written in the days to come, not by listening to grumpy accountants wonder if the younger generation was not growing disrespectful and weak.

Still, the question remained. Was it some bad luck which had placed the goblins on the path of a veteran of the Grindelwald War? Or was there something more sinister at play?

The old goblin was listing the pros and the cons in his head when he entered his office and noticed something very wrong.

A large book was opened on his desk.

A large book was opened, but when he had left his office two days ago, every ledger, book and roll of parchment had been placed on the shelves and the runic-secured drawers.

Someone had entered his office.

A push on one of his security systems, and it was confirmed. One human magical signature had been detected.

“But nobody heard the alarms screaming in the middle of the battle...”

This was bad. But as he activated more and more measures, nothing of importance appeared to have been taken. Nothing. The only book or possession in his office out of place was the book on the desk.

This was not making any sense at all. Looking at the opened book, Grimjaw read the contents. Yes, it was the genealogical tree of the Potter family, no doubt about it. It was something...

No. When he had last looked at it something like three months ago, there had been two names shining in red blood letters, while the rest of the tree was black and dead. The name of James Potter was in a red-green taint, indicating his status as a fallen Lord. The name of his daughter was in the colour of blood and had not changed shade.

But now there weren’t two names. There were three, and for a moment Grimjaw thought the blood wards around the Potter vaults had suffered a disastrous malfunction.

Two hours later, he was forced to admit defeat. If there was a malfunction, it was not one he could detect. The blood and the magic of Lilian Potter nee Evans registered her as alive once more, which by all rights should be impossible, wand-wielder witch or not.

There were many explanations for this, and the likeliest in his mind involved the word ‘undead’.

“I should have retired ten years ago.” Grimjaw told the silent walls.

**1 November 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

If there was one thing to remember about today, it was that three glasses of Firewhiskey weren’t enough to let him forget his problems.

Maybe a fourth glass would do the trick. And if the fourth didn’t, the fifth surely would.

It was just a question of quantity, Albus was sure.

One more drink and he would feel better. He had to be. He had to forget.

He didn’t want to remember *that* night. He didn’t want to remember *that* duel.

He didn’t want to remember one of the worst moments of his life...but even after the tenth glass of Firewhiskey, the memories were returning with more and more insistence.

Damn you, Gellert. Damn you, Dark Lord Grindelwald. Damn you, Aberforth.

*Damn you, Albus Dumbledore*.

The moment he had been able to get away from the journalists, the Aurors, and this incompetent buffoon Cornelius Fudge, he had Apparated to Godric’s Hollow. He had to know. He had to discover if Gellert’s last words had been a poisoned dagger to wound him or the truth. Albus didn’t know if he wanted the former or the latter.

It was the latter.

“How could we not notice?” he asked the ceiling, pouring an eleventh glass of Firewhiskey into his mouth. “How could we be so blind?”

A homunculus. The ‘sister’ they had slain during the three-way fratricidal duel of 1889 was a bloody homunculus.

And neither Aberforth nor he had noticed a damned thing. Granted, there must have been a few complicated illusions and Notice-Me-Not Charms cast upon it, but...

“We were blinded by pain and vengeance,” Albus Dumbledore, Double Defeater of Grindelwald and former Supreme Mugwump, acknowledged. “We should have known better. We should have...”

But they couldn’t at that time. He had been far less knowledgeable about the odious experiments Dark Wizards could create with dead bodies. And the very people who would have noticed something was wrong immediately, like the Healers of Saint Mungo’s Hospital, would have tried everything they could...before asking for the Aurors’ presence.

Homunculus or not, there had been enough curses thrown around to send them to prison for a few years. And the body of his sister, if it had been the real one like they believed at the time, would have been enough to send them straight to Azkaban for life.

On this point, Aberforth and he had agreed. It was better to say the disease which had made Ariana suffer for the better part of her childhood had finally killed her. It was...it was better for everyone.

Even if Aberforth had gotten dead drunk before the funeral and had almost sent them to the DMLE cells by barking her death was his fault and breaking his nose.

They had not spoken much in the years after that. Albus deeply regretted this. And in many aspects, yes, Ariana’s death was his fault. It was him who had invited Gellert into their home.

“And yet,” the thirteenth glass of Firewhiskey was drunk. It was strangely fitting as a number symbolic of betrayal, deceit, and misfortune.

Ariana had not died that day, one hundred and four years ago. And Gellert had used the last seconds of his life to speak those last, cruel words.

*Ariana lives*.

It meant...it meant he had been a huge idiot.

No, idiot was too kind a word. He had been a simpleton, a borderline Squib, and an ignoramus.

His mother and his brother had ceaselessly told him Ariana’s condition could not be treated. They had spoken over and over again of how going to Saint Mungo’s would be tantamount to sending her to a secure Wing of the Hospital permanently.

And he had believed them. But if she truly was alive after over a century...well, it was logical to think the Dark friends of Gellert had cured her of her magical affliction.

It had not been incurable. His mother had just thought of the family’s reputation first.

It was the reputation of House Dumbledore above everything. It was the reputation of House Dumbledore above the life and the happiness of Ariana.

And as the treatment would have cost a lot of money, the wealth of House Dumbledore over the life of a teenage girl too.

The bottle of Firewhiskey soon had nothing more to give and he shattered it against the wall in disgust.

It had happened one hundred and four years ago, but he knew at last the truth.

The question was what to do. Something in him burned to announce it to Aberforth. His brother had never manifested a lot of repentance for the fact it might have been *his* spell which had cut down Ariana during the duel. No, it was Albus’ fault here, Albus’ fault there.

Had it been Albus’ fault that his brother got two OWLs on his first try, repeated his fifth year at Hogwarts and at last was departed from the castle at the end of his sixth year when it was obvious none of the four classes he was accepted in could tolerate such a mediocre student?

But no. If the evidence convinced his brother – unlikely, knowing his stubbornness – it might kill him. And if it didn’t, it might do more damage and throw more oil onto the fire of their tense and barely existent relationship.

And there was no one else he could tell. He couldn’t trust anyone with this...crime or no crime, murder or no murder...it was his sister. The sister he had failed in every way that counted.

From a certain perspective...Gellert had done him an immense favour. If he had met her first on a battlefield without warning...he was a powerful wizard, but the shock would paralyse him.

It was not impossible it would still paralyse him if it happened. Killing Gellert had hurt his mind and his heart, and their love had diminished. Fighting his sister...it was certainly above his mental strength.

And it assumed he was able to match her. If his sister had become a Dark Witch worthy of entering the ranks of those who had once recruited Gellert, her powers had to be redoubtable. Whether it was random chance or not, none of the three Dumbledore children had been magically weak. Aberforth had little skill with a wand, but he had raw strength in spades.

Merlin only knew what she had applied her skills and her mind to during the last century.

How deep into the darkness had she fallen?

How much did she hate him?

“You should stop drinking, Albus,” Alastor growled as he entered the room. Albus turned tired eyes towards the entrance as Sirius and several other members of the Order of the Phoenix followed the old Auror into his office. “It does not make you forget.”

Well, Alastor knew what he was speaking about. The thought almost made him chuckle. Almost. These were dark days and it was difficult to see anything good in the aftermath of a battle which had destroyed half of Hogsmeade.

“I will take you at your word, Alastor,” he said before casting a quick Reparo on the empty bottle of Firewhiskey and levitating it behind him. “We must talk about our new Dark Wizard problem.”

“Who are they?” asked Sirius, charging in like a true Gryffindor. “The former supporters of the Dark Lord Grindelwald never showed capacities like that even at the height of his powers!”

“This new faction is not supporting Grindelwald per se,” the Headmaster of Hogwarts revealed. “They are a type of threat which I believed to be always working in an indirect role...they are called the Exchequer.”

Judging by the torrent of questions, the explanations were going to take a while.

**3 November 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Alexandra had imagined a lot of scenarios once they entered the office of the Professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts. Maybe there would be a destructive fight. It was why she had come with Morag, Hermione, Fred, and George. Knowing the wizard’s proficiency with fire spells, it was best to bring a lot of wands to stop him before there was too much destruction.

Another possible scenario was the Professor refusing to talk and denying everything, leaving them only with vague suspicions and the like.

There had been plenty of other possibilities the group had imagined beforehand.

But as they were invited to come inside after knocking, seeing Professor Erasmus Rincewind pack his affairs with levitation charms and in the process of removing all the weird decorations in his office had not been thought of.

“You are leaving, Professor?” Hermione was the first to ask the burning question.

The brown-haired magician once more used his hat like a large fan, but this time, it seemed more like a shield. There was exhaustion and unhappiness on the man’s visage.

“Yes, I’m afraid I’m leaving, Miss Granger. I’ve been fired this very morning by Professor Dumbledore.”

“But...why?” Alexandra had a little idea on the motivations of Professor Dumbledore, but stayed silent as George asked the question.

“I think the proper term is ‘cooperation with the enemy’, Mr. Weasley,” the veteran of the Grindelwald War replied with a thin smile. “The Headmaster, in his great wisdom, has expressed the opinion I am working for the Dark organisation known as the Exchequer. His arguments appear to have convinced the Board of Governors by a slim majority, unfortunately.”

“His arguments?” repeated Morag. Hearing the disgust when the last word had been uttered, there was something unclear at hand.

“The arguments were somewhat...indirect,” the red-robed wizard explained. “I killed a lot of goblins on Samhain, and the Dark Wizards of this organisation are of course known for their hatred of the goblins. I was not present when the Dark Wizards arrived at Hogsmeade, which is of course incredibly suspicious by itself. Never mind that five of my colleagues weren’t present too. On a Sunday, Professors who are not Head of Houses are free to leave the castle, it is written black on white in our employment contract. I am known for my use of Dark-aligned spells when I battle my enemies. I am giving lessons where I go against the Ministry guidelines.”

“And?” Alexandra demanded, taking great care to always be in position to draw Fragarach should it become necessary. On the subject of the accusations, yes these were the facts which created a lot of suspicion in her mind. But these were suspicions, nothing more. Professor Snape, according to a lot of rumours, could have taught Dark Arts at Durmstrang, and yet the DMLE didn’t storm the castle every time there was an instance of ill-conduct on his part.

“And I’m afraid it was enough to convince the Board of Governors to not object when he declared his intention to sack me.”

“That can’t be right,” Hermione said in an unconvinced tone. “These arguments don’t prove anything, and besides to go that fast, he would need to have a candidate to fill the empty post of Senior DADA Professor.”

“He has one,” the ex-Professor Rincewind said as he turned his head to watch the windows. “A certain Professor R. J. Lupin will fulfil my teaching duties until the end of the year.”

It was good no one was looking in her direction, because Alexandra could not help but make a heavy grimace. The fourth member of the quartet known as the Marauders was going to teach. Why did it feel like a terrible idea?

Still, it left an important question unanswered.

“Are you a member of the Exchequer?”

“I am not,” joyously answered the pyromaniac who had burned Dresden to the ground. “I may have been hired as a mercenary by them from time to time, however.”

This...well, this was new. Slowly, she drew Fragarach from the scabbard.

“So you were definitely hired to spy on us.”

“No, not to spy on you, Miss Potter. I was here to spy on Dumbledore and the other teachers. I was not paid to spy on innocent children. I have my pride and my moral code, thank you.”

The red hat was agitated again, and Erasmus Rincewind didn’t look in the least worried she was threatening him with a dangerous sword.

“But since my contract ended a few hours ago...I will admit I have my suspicions another Professor may be an agent of the Exchequer inside Hogwarts. In Germany, this spy is called ‘Nachtmar’ and in the UMAS, they have called him ‘Imposter’. It is likely one of the core teachers was replaced during the summer holidays by him.”

“Polyjuice and glamour are not enough to impersonate someone for nine months,” Fred said in a very suspicious tone.

“Mr. Weasley, please use your fertile imagination in this instance. Do you really think that Polyjuice is something practitioners of the Dark are satisfied with? It lasts for one hour, the duration is ridiculously difficult to extend, and the user has no clues about the behaviour, the memories, nor the likes and dislikes of the target he is supposed to impersonate. And the European Ministries are always careful to monitor the core ingredients to make this Potion. No, Polyjuice is a flawed Potion at the root. It is likely the other spy will use a ridiculously obscure method for which he has methodically composed the arithmantic calculations himself.”

Rincewind slammed his staff on the ground, generating more blue-red sparks.

“I am not your Professor anymore, so I suppose I don’t have the responsibility to give you advice or teaching instructions...but I will give you two because you are smarter than the rest and you came to my office.”

“And these are?” Hermione questioned warily.

“I think you have already begun to apply the first. Don’t trust Dumbledore under any pretext. The Defeater of Grindelwald wants victory, but his conditions and his purposes are never the same as those marching under his banner.”

There was a new slam of the staff, and they all received a roll of parchment in their hands.

“The second is the last homework I will ever give you.” Alexandra frowned, as the document was filled from top to bottom with incredibly complex Arithmantic equations. “The position of the DADA Professor is heavily cursed. The wizard who did it is the wizard known as Lord Voldemort. Until you have learned how to break this Curse, do not attempt under any pretext to claim the position.”

“You could have dispelled the curse,” Alexandra said flatly. And she made it an affirmation, not a question, as she returned Fragarach to her scabbard.

“I could,” Rincewind agreed. “But it would have involved a lot of Fiendfyre.”

“Maybe it’s best to avoid this method,” Hermione said in a soft voice.

“Maybe,” Rincewind agreed and suddenly the ex-DADA Professor looked like a man who had seen too much. “It was a pleasure to have you as students. We may meet again next year...if not take care of yourself, keep your lungs clear, and don’t forget to enjoy life!”

And on this Erasmus Rincewind, Butcher of Dresden and famous pyromaniac wizard, jumped on the large Mimic he had used to store his affairs, transformed into an orang-utan and the false-chest raced out of the room. Seconds later, ten other Mimics from diverse part of the room ran out in pursuit.

“I think that somehow, we are going to miss him,” Fred and George spoke as one in the now thoroughly empty office.

**4 November 1993, somewhere south of the Black Lake, Scotland**

Before November 3, 1993, it had been possible to leave Hogwarts for a few hours if one was a student. It was not authorised during the class hours, of course. But provided one had the authorisation of his or her Head of House, it was possible to leave the school. The reasons were varied and multiple. Several students had appointments with Healers, parents wanted to tell their children face to face they didn’t pay expensive sums for mediocre grades, there were a few purebloods tutored in disciplines not taught in the castle, and many other excuses.

Now it was over. Using his returned popularity, Headmaster Dumbledore, twice-vanquisher of the Dark Lord Grindelwald, had decided that until Hogsmeade had been rebuilt and the surviving Dark Wizard had been arrested, every excursion outside the wards was, for the present, cancelled. The medical appointments were now done using the Floo, and had to go through Dumbledore first. As for the rest of the possible activities students needed to do outside Hogwarts, it was regrettable, but this was a temporary and emergency measure.

It was to be noted that being the author of the *Loud Duck* was now worth a fine of twenty thousand Galleons and four months of suspension. Writing in big letters that it wasn’t a great deed to kill an ex-Dark Lord who spent over forty years in an insalubrious prison had not pleased the Chief Warlock at all.

Dumbledore had the Wizengamot licking his feet again, and like a spoiled child, his reactions were short-sighted and stupid.

*Fulmen Imperator*, the *Gungnir Spear*, and the *Mjöllnir Call* were now forbidden to the common wizard and witch, and ten books which explained how to cast them had been placed in the Forbidden Section.

Sometimes it was really easy to believe Albus Dumbledore wanted them to stand and march to their deaths with smiles on their faces like sheep to the slaughter. After all, how was it possible to have any chance to defend yourself properly when the enemy had a library worth of Necromantic Curses and you had the Expelliarmus?

When she had tested Hannah yesterday, her duelling capabilities had been abysmal...

But yes, going outside the wards was now forbidden and if someone was caught, it was likely suspension would be the fate of the guilty.

It was also one of those short-sighted and stupid measures which had been used before. Dumbledore was in the Netherlands today, trying to convince the local authorities to reveal where the Dark Wizard had crossed the Channel – the French had refused to talk to him. In his absence and with the departure of Professor Rincewind, Hogwarts was undermanned as it was and with less than fifty teachers – the number was far closer to twenty in reality – and they could only catch the students violating the rules if they were stupid enough to pass by the main gates.

Blaise and she just had to walk by a little known courtyard before taking their brooms and flying south for a few minutes. Moral of the story: don’t try to push for rules you have no means to enforce.

Sighing, Alexandra returned to the small piece of paper she had in her hands. It had been directly delivered to Zabini Manor, which was a wise precaution as another ‘Dumbledore law’ had been passed a few hours ago authorising Aurors to intercept and read the mail of the students.

*I am sorry. I love you*.

There was no name, just a signature in form of flower.

It was a lily.

“And to say that when I went to Hogwarts, I thought my family was complicated. Now my father is an insane wizard recently escaped from Azkaban, and my mother is a vampire.”

Deep inside, she felt...she felt empty. Yes, she had wanted to have a family. Yes, she would have signed away ten thousand Galleons to get rid of the Dursleys and go back to living with her mother.

But not like this. Near three years of knowing that at least one of her parents had loved her sufficiently to make the ultimate sacrifice...and now this.

There was a small box with the short message. Alexandra opened it and hissed. It was a brooch in the shape of a butterfly. It was a butterfly, and unless she was greatly mistaken, it had been created and enchanted with emeralds and diamonds.

“An impressive work,” Stella Zabini commented, as the autumn wind made her long black robe flow with each gust. “There’s an elaborate Shield-Type Charm powered by Inca Sun Runes. Brooches like this are worth easily seventy or eighty thousand Galleons.”

“It doesn’t make me feel better.” The brooch was superb, but she failed to find any joy looking at it. “Was there anything sent with the message and the brooch?”

“There was. Your mother sent me a letter to advise me I’d better take care of you if I wanted to marry another husband.”

Blaise scoffed loudly twenty feet away.

“I suppose I should feel reassured, but...” the Potter Heiress didn’t finish the sentence. She wasn’t finding the words. “The treasure chest?”

“It is not trapped. But it needs a particular magical signature to open.”

Alexandra breathed out and stood from the massive stone she had used as a seat. Kneeling in front of the chest, the Ravenclaw third-year conjured some small green flames in her left hand and pressed it against the lock. The ancient mechanism gave away and the chest was open.

Like many trunks and other objects created by witches and wizards, it was bigger inside than it was outside, but not so much. It was also very old-fashioned. The decoration had been placed outside, not inside, and it took some time to figure exactly what she had before her eyes.

It was not the armour of Mordred, a legendary sword, or an artefact from the time of Arthur. It was not an heirloom once worn by Morgana.

There were five of them, shining in golden light, and when she grabbed one and raised it to let the timid sun shine over it, it was like a miniature golden sun had been conjured.

“This is a dragon egg,” Alexandra gasped, showing it to Blaise as the dour Slytherin was staring with his mouth comically wide open.

“These are *the* dragon eggs,” Stella Zabini corrected. “If the ancient books on the subject are true, these are eggs of Britannian Gold. These were the heavyweight dragons the Roman legions tried to capture and breed for the Caesars. They have been extinct for more than nine hundred years.”

“And there are five of them.” Between magic and the long life of the flying reptiles, the dragons could be reborn.

“And there are five of them.” The Black Widow repeated. “If you want to make them hatch for winter, I will prepare the paperwork and an appropriate site.”

Alexandra shook her head in disbelief.

“I suppose it is good I have a mountain of gold in my vaults for them to sleep on...”

**Author’s note**:

For the short-term consequences of the battle, this ends here. For the long-term consequences, there will be far more aftershocks in the next years...

The next chapter will likely be titled *Ultimatum* (tentative).

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