**Chapter 72**

**The Second Water Games**

**1 April 1994, Ministry of Magic, London, England**

Even by his own standards, Bartemius Crouch knew he was staying far too late in his office at the Ministry these days. Some of his colleagues might argue he never was in a hurry to get back to his home, and this was absolutely true. There was nothing waiting for him there.

On the other hand, that he preferred doing something profitable to his sanity rather than being remembered over and over of his failures did not mean the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation enjoyed spending his evening correcting and filling page after page of the most boring paperwork imaginable.

It was one of those monumental chores which were only liked by a few rare individuals, and the last surviving member of the Crouch family was not among them. It never got better. The higher you rose in the Ministry, the more the pile of parchments rose over your desk.

It was bad in normal circumstances, but since Dumbledore had been ejected from the post of Supreme Mugwump, the situation on this front was giving him new headaches. Yes, it was Dumbledore who was at fault.

Without a week of warning, the ICW liaisons went from something he had literally zero power over to a war zone where his chief delegate on the terrain was Lucius Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy, of all people. Merlin and Morgana save him, what sort of idiot could readily believe it was a good idea to give a notorious money-launderer, criminal, smuggler, and Death Eater – those were the crimes he could prove without difficulty – this important diplomatic position?

The Department’s Head shook his head in consternation. Cursing Fudge had never felt so tempting.

This wasn’t the end of the bureaucratic nightmare. For a reason which escaped him but had everything to do with Dumbledore’s meddling, the Quidditch World Cup and the inter-school European Magical Tournament were happening in the same year, although the latter thankfully was not taking place in Britain.

And since Quidditch was a game and the old Tri-Wizard Tournament was traditionally a ‘friendly’ series of trials, not only did Bartemius have to do his own work, he had to investigate the failings and the problems caused by the Department of Magical Sports and Games as well.

Sometimes, Bartemius Crouch was really, really exhausted by the astounding level of incompetence he was surrounded with, and chief among those offenders were Fudge, Dumbledore, and last but not least, Ludovic Bagman.

The powerful wizard looked at his watch – a gift of his wife he particularly cherished - and noticed the little watch pointer had reached the eleven mark.

Slowly, the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation acknowledged that he wasn’t going to win this round against the parchments and the terrible forces of the European bureaucracy. And there was a preliminary at Hogwarts tomorrow. He had not volunteered, but he was one of the judges. He had to look alert and the image of a competent and professional Department Head, even if no one but him appeared to care anymore in this Ministry of idiots.

The ink pot was sealed for today, and the quill was magically cleaned up before returning to its case.

Bartemius locked the files and the drawers with several NEWT-level Charms – one was never prudent anymore with all the embarrassments regularly happening lately – before exiting his office, locking it with an even more complicated incantation, and marching in the direction of the elevator.

In the minutes it took him to reach the Atrium, the former DMLE Director met only a single figure, and it was an Unspeakable. Obviously there was no exchange of words between the two men – assuming the being hidden by a black hood and long dark black robes was a man at all. Crouch had never been a friend to the Department of Mysteries; several attempts had been made by the secretive Department to sink his career in the past, and he had always been extremely skeptical of the time which had led to his son being arrested mere weeks after Augustus Rookwood received a very public trial. And if he had to be honest, many times he had returned the favour with interest. There never was enough money for the Ministry to function correctly, and the vague answers of the Unspeakables had convinced him plenty of times they might benefit from some financial cuts if they wanted to keep their full independence.

Nevertheless, the mysterious denizens of the Department of Mysteries could be trusted to do their work – they worked late and from time to time produced impressive enchanted objects for the common wizard to use in the Ministry’s best interests. The security wizards would never be able to say the same. In such a turbulent period, there should have been four or five guards in the Atrium. Instead, there was one, and he was sleeping at his desk.

He certainly was another pure-blood brought in by Fudge for his ‘impressive skills’; no talent, no motivation, no dedication to his work, but a prestigious name. Merlin and Morgana, this Ministry was truly beginning to reek of incompetence so much it was a wonder it had not collapsed under the stupidity weighing it down.

“And they say I would have been a disaster as Minister...” the last man of House Crouch muttered as he searched in his pockets for a dose of Floo powder.

And then one of the chimneys lit in green fire, ejecting a naked man from the Floo Network.

“What in the name of Merlin?”

Bartemius Crouch was tired, and he had to pinch himself to be sure he wasn’t hallucinating. But no, he wasn’t.

Before him was a near-naked Ludovic Bagman, hog-tied by a lot of ropes, a fruit in his mouth to prevent him from speaking, and an old-fashioned arrow whose point had to be in his backside. Oh, and his back was painted with a sort of foul purple painting. The only thing the ex-Beater had left was his underpants.

More worrying was the notice attached to the collar Bagman wore around his neck.

**WE’RE BACK**

Bartemius Crouch grimaced.

“Farewell, good night of sleep...”

**2 April 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Where is Bagman?”

Nigel’s question made Alexandra turn her head in the direction of the judge’s seats, and indeed the former Beater of the Wimbourne Wasps was failing to honour them with his presence today.

“I don’t know,” the raven-haired Ravenclaw replied, “and I don’t particularly care. In my opinion, it’s a good thing he isn’t here today. My ears were already dreading in advance the sound of his voice.”

“Maybe they will bring Lee Jordan in to replace him?” Hermione suggested.

“It doesn’t look like it...hey, look, Cornelius Fudge is here, standing next to Dumbledore!”

“Cornelius Fudge and Rufus Scrimgeour,” Alexandra added in a thoughtful tone. Since Crouch and Dumbledore were already here, accompanied by Karel van Dusseldorp, the probability of these being the five judges for the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor third trial was skyrocketing. “Well, this is certainly interesting.”

“Agreed,” Morag said before narrowing her eyes. “Our esteemed judges don’t look happy to be here – Dusseldorp excepted, I suppose.”

It was true that past the traditional shaking of hands of the politicians, the Minister and the Chief Warlock were doing an excellent job of avoiding each other and feigning that the other official didn’t exist. The same was true of Scrimgeour and the Head of International Magical Cooperation. The Dutch wizard was in the centre with a genuine smile on his lips, though it was becoming a bit strained.

If anyone asked, Alexandra was going to say it was English politics at its worse.

“GIVE A WARM WELCOME TO THE CHAMPIONS OF GRYFFINDOR AND HUFFLEPUFF!” a middle-aged man in Auror robes shouted, one the Basilisk-Slayer had never seen before. Clearly, he was the official ordered to comment on the preliminary on this sunny day of April.

Five seconds later, the bright yellow and crimson red-clothed columns of the two Houses made their entrance onto the Quidditch pitch, under a salvo of applause.

Judging by their surprised faces, Professor Flitwick had been able to preserve the secret until the last moment.

Not a sign of the grass covering the pitch was visible anymore, as thanks to foreign assistance, a gigantic swimming pool had been placed on top of the greenness. To make things more exotic, the weather-control and the temperature charms must have been cast at least yesterday and protected by an immense bubble-ward to keep the tropical climate inside.

As a result, the Exiled and everyone else save the officials and the judges had rapidly transfigured their clothes for something more summer-like. After some hesitation, the champions of the Badgers and the Lions soon arrived at the same conclusion and about half of the Gryffindors chose to discard everything and go for a swimsuit.

“They’re already having far more fun than we ever did during this blasted trial on the Black Lake,” Hermione complained.

“You stayed on the starting line for this one,” Alexandra reminded the former Gryffindor. “Whether we were lucky or not, I will make my final judgement once someone has completed it. Professor Flitwick has been very busy for this trial.”

The swimming pool was just a part of the infrastructure which had been built in the stadium normally reserved for Quidditch games. In fact, Alexandra was ready to bet it was more a security feature to ensure no one was hurt. The real preliminary was above the water.

It was...it was difficult to describe. There were multiple toboggans. Pipes, gigantic enchanted red pillows, ladders, and catwalks were everywhere. It was maybe the most unconventional series of obstacles she had ever seen. And everything had a water theme.

The catwalks were half a foot above powerful geysers. The ladders were drenched by artificial waves. The ‘red pillows’ were akin to inflating and deflating balloons, risking at every moment sending you on an expeditious bath in the pool under the unstable objects. The toboggans were seemingly enchanted to go everywhere in the manner of the Hogwarts’ stairs.

Alexandra could see vaguely what needed to be done to arrive at the podium where Madam Pomfrey, several Medi-Witches, and a few security people waited. In theory, even with the geysers and the platforms above the water moving, it shouldn’t be too difficult...which hinted their Charms Professor must have some surprises in store for the champions.

“YOUR OBJECTIVE FOR THIS PRELIMINARY IS SIMPLE, CHAMPIONS!” the Auror announced as twenty-seven Gryffindors and twenty-five Hufflepuffs formed three lines on the first platform, on top of a really, really huge blue toboggan. “YOU HAVE TO REACH THE PLATFORM WITH THE GREEN FLAG WITHOUT FALLING INTO THE WATER BELOW! EVERY FALL INTO THE WATER WILL REQUIRE YOU TO RETURN TO WHERE YOU ARE STANDING AND START FROM THE VERY BEGINNING...AGAIN! YOU HAVE TWO HOURS TO ACHIEVE THIS!”

Okay, that was just vicious and worthy of Professor Flitwick.

“3...2...1...GO!”

Instantly, it was a chaotic melee to get into the toboggans first, just as the geysers tripled in intensity and more water jets appeared everywhere. Several platforms which had stayed immobile or deactivated were suddenly no longer safe, and animated figures with foam and limbs began to rotate in increasingly faster moves.

“Still think it was better than the Black Lake?” the Potter Heiress asked sarcastically. Hermione failed to provide an answer.

“The twins are already out!” Morag exclaimed a second after, as two big splashes exploded the surface of the swimming pool. “It’s McLaggen who pushed them, I saw him!”

“I’m sure he did,” the green-eyed girl trusted the judgement of her Irish friend on this. “But did you notice the judges didn’t say it was against the rules?”

The next instants saw a lot of reckonings and mean vengeances in the ranks of the Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs. Nobility, fairness, fair-play, honour...all of these qualities were discarded in less than ten seconds. Many people had their wands in hand, and when the weakest Expelliarmus could force someone to take a dive into the azure basin under the preliminary’s obstacles, this was a temptation few participants were not tempted to exploit.

And of course as the first survivors began to clear the second obstacle – the famous ‘red pillows’ – circles of runes materialised and it appeared the ladders and a lot of paths were trapped with magical effects ranging from the ridiculous to the frustrating.

There were fifty-two champions present today. In three minutes top, only six managed to avoid falling into the swimming pool, and four of those didn’t survive the fourth and fifth minute. Leading the survivors was Cedric Diggory, of course. The transfiguration skills of the older Hufflepuff and likely the fact none of the Badgers wanted to play dirty with him ensured the first obstacles were quickly cleared.

Following him was Ronald Weasley.

“Weird, we aren’t supposed to be hallucinating because of the warmth...” Morag smirked, before seconds later a big splash indicated Weasley was temporarily eliminated too.

“This trial is physically exhausting,” Alexandra commented as she watched more than forty boys and girls, including Susan and Hannah, try to climb up on the suspended platform where the start of the preliminary was given. “There are only three ways to return to the first obstacle, and even in a swimming suit, water is a non-negligible obstacle.”

The third-year Ravenclaw would have also had problems with this sort of trial. The Hydra in her loved water and would have likely urged her to swim and swim until her water-addiction was satiated.

“You’re right. And Diggory is going to win.”

Barring a disastrous event, Morag was right. Cedric Diggory had managed to cancel the Rune-traps waiting on the major obstacles, and since most of the other champions had barely returned to the beginning of the preliminary, there was no opposition and the Badger could take his time to clear obstacle after obstacle. His muscular body was another advantage – though Cho didn’t look happy that thanks to the water, every girl in the stands could watch her boyfriend with adoring eyes.

A last succession of three toboggans with several self-propelling charms, and the leading champion of Hufflepuff arrived on the last platform.

Obviously, the quarter of the stadium all devoted to the Badgers exploded in triumph and the Auror’s voice a few seconds later was mostly made unintelligible as the Badgers began to party. Whatever happened now, tonight was going to be a moment of celebrations in the Common Room of Hufflepuff.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Alex, but I think Cedric can’t be caught up to by anyone else, no?” Hermione rolled her eyes immediately after, as Cho Chang and many girls of Ravenclaw were shouting with everything they had in their lungs to cheer on the victorious Hufflepuff.

“We will have to wait for the judges, but it looks good for him, yes. Cedric was roughly fifty points ahead of Preece, and if he gets a near-perfect score today, he will have won the Hufflepuff contest before the last preliminary.”

Before they could elaborate on the subject, the Exiled winced again as they saw Fred and George be sent once again plunging into the no-longer azure waters of the Water Preliminary.

“I think it was Alicia Spinnet and Fiona Belmont who hit them this time,” Nigel helpfully remarked.

“Why? It’s-“

“It’s the competition, Hermione,” Alexandra bared her teeth, but didn’t smile. “Most of the Lions so far haven’t been able to win a single point in two preliminaries, and for all the problems lurking ahead, there are dozens of students who really, really want to participate in the European Magical Tournament.”

If they arrived with zero points to the last preliminary in one month, these ambitious champions would be pretty much disqualified before they took a step. They had to win a lot of points, and they had to do it fast.

Surprisingly, as more and more Badgers and Lions took their second bath of the day, a trio of champions cooperated between each other to jinx the rune-combinations spread on every obstacle, jumping and cooperating, even if in an improvised manner.

“Geoffrey Hooper, Ernie Macmillan, and Tamsin Applebee...”

“Susan has been eliminated again,” Alexandra groaned sonorously.

“Yes, yes, too bad for your cuddly Badger,” Morag retorted, receiving a sticking charm for her words. “We are focusing on the leading pack.”

Of which neither Susan nor any of the champions they really wanted to win were part of. To be honest, it wasn’t really a painful revelation. Thanks to the water jets and the amusing inventions of their teacher, you needed to be physically strong or benefitting from teamwork. Luck and not having some participants targeting you as a priority was a must too.

Alexandra tightened her fists as she saw Zacharias Smith was acting like an opposing force on top of a red toboggan, casting minor hexes everywhere and ensuring most of those he considered a real danger were unable to advance on their own.

“Second place, Geoffrey Hooper. Third place, Tamsin Applebee. Fourth place, Ernest Macmillan,” Nigel said as the first trio finished their Trial of Water. “Wasn’t Hooper in fifth place of the Gryffindor rankings?”

“He was,” that was not good at all for the Twins. Especially as the second group which was sliding down the pipes and providing a show for the horde of red and gold in the stands consisted of Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, and Neville Longbottom. “There are champions who are forfeiting.”

Endurance was proving to be a problem for more and more boys and girls. Already five Hufflepuffs had decided their efforts weren’t going to amount to something for this preliminary and they simply gave up.

The battle raged for several minutes in the fourth and fifth waves, and it was one George won, though his twin was sent by Zacharias into the water again.

“Fifth place, Johnson. Sixth place, the Boy-Who-Lived. Seventh place, Katie Bell. Eighth place, Herbert Fleet. Ninth place, Leo Black. Tenth place, Kenneth Towler. Eleventh place, Malcolm Preece,” Hermione enumerated in a bored tone.

The next minutes were followed by a litany of forfeits, including, to her disappointment, Susan and Hannah, escorted by other third-years like Megan Jones and Roger Malone.

Four Gryffindors stayed and climbed up anew for a last tentative run; Zacharias Smith however seemed to reconsider it after Fred partially transfigured him into something with scales and a large crest.

Four Gryffindors left in the race: the Twins of course, Cormac McLaggen, and Ronald Weasley.

Unfortunately, there was no grand moment of Weasley unity, and it was the fault of the younger redhead. McLaggen was thus granted the opportunity to arrive first in the geyser zone in the middle of the obstacles.

Fred and George fought with an impressive combination of prank spells, but after a few minutes realised they weren’t going to win this one, and saluting the crowd, they jumped feet first into the blue waters which had so dominated this preliminary.

After that, it was only a question of minutes before the last two Lions completed it and the judges announced the end of the Water Preliminary.

“I would have preferred another result,” the Potter Heiress told her friends as the Hufflepuffs and many Ravenclaw began to shout the name of Cedric Diggory. The list of names which was presented thirty minutes later didn’t convince her to amend her sentence.

*Cedric Diggory – 93 points*

*Geoffrey Hooper – 74 points*

*Tamsin Applebee – 71 points*

*Ernest Macmillan – 70 points*

*Angelina Johnson – 56 points*

*Neville Longbottom – 55 points*

*Katie Bell – 53 points*

*Herbert Fleet – 40 points*

*Leo Black – 38 points*

*Kenneth Towler – 35 points*

*Malcolm Preece – 35 points*

*Cormac McLaggen – 23 points*

*Ronald Weasley – 21 points*

It could have been worse. That braggart McLaggen had won many points, but there were plenty of Gryffindors who had done better than him. Angelina Johnson was leading once more. Hooper was an unknown quantity, however. And as predicted, for the Hufflepuffs, Diggory was now the uncontested Champion.

If there had been any doubts on this topic, the ruckus the Badgers caused when the tall captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team arrived to shake hands with Cornelius Fudge would have removed them in a couple of heartbeats.

**3 April 1994, somewhere off the southern coast of England**

Had she still been human, the carnage would have likely horrified her, or given her awful nausea.

She wasn’t human anymore. Whether it was a very good or a very bad thing was still an undecided fact in her mind.

As she saw vampires and wererats devour and bleed to death the dozens of humans they were using as livestock, a little voice in her head wanted to say it was very bad. But the feral beast growling in her body was of a different opinion. It wanted to participate in this bloodbath. It wanted to feast and drink blood in profusion.

It took a colossal effort of will to stay immobile. To be entirely truthful, it was less the colossal effort of will and the fact that she had already eaten and drunk an hour ago that prevented this temptation from eroding her resolve.

For several long minutes, Lilian Marie Evans – assuming she still was this woman despite her new abilities and appearance – didn’t move, breathe, or make a sound. She just watched and waited, like she had been ordered.

It wasn’t like she could do anything valuable anyway. Attacking the Shadow Blades Coven by herself? It would lead to her death; not permanently, but her death nonetheless. Lily was a far more skilled and powerful Enchantress than she had been that fateful night at Godric’s Hollow, but she was not invincible. And facing alone hundreds of vampires required one to be invincible against them, or at least superior in magic to the point one was immune to their powers and weapons. Sadly, the redhead vampire was far from this level.

As for joining their feasting, well past the initial moment of mutual slaughter, there would be questions asked. Questions her Mistress would not be amused to be informed they had been in a position to be made. Both the vampire and the diminishing human in her shivered in fear at the thought. There were some things in this world still capable of frightening her, and now that she had visited a few of the Exchequer laboratories, the former Gryffindor girl knew the fate the Organisation reserved for its traitors was one to be avoided at all costs.

The army of Victor Aemillius and his Shadow Blades stayed far longer in this abandoned village than she thought reasonable or practical. Not to mention there weren’t exactly discreet, Thaumaturgy-based powers or not. It was barely three hours before dawn when the Coven Elders and the older *Vampiri Orientem* restored some measure of discipline and the skinchangers and the vampires moved out.

There were plenty of flaws one could find where the vampire formerly imprisoned in one of the most secure cells of Azkaban was studied, but idleness was not one of them. The Shadow Blades had recruited hard, while they remained on the continent. The Pawns assigned before her had estimated Aemillius had less than one hundred and twenty vampires left when he arrived in the Carpathians last year, two-thirds of them inexperienced *Vampiri Orientem*.

The force which had returned to the British Isles was far more powerful and trained. There were at least three hundred vampires now, supported by two hundred wererats. And the Orientem warriors were ruling over fifty-plus corpse-like *Vampiri Noctis*.

“They really intend to challenge the Ministry this time, don’t they?” the crimson-haired *Vampiri Romani* said when it was clear the Shadow Blades had departed for good.

There was a murmur of darkness and a light noise as her contact allowed her senses to perceive her presence.

“Victor has always been the vengeful sort,” High Sentinel Artemis Cassius of the Soul Drinkers replied. “I think ‘challenge’ is underestimating what he has in mind.”

“In that case, there’s a high likelihood he is going to die,” Lily declared bluntly.

The *Vampiri Orientem* forming the heart and the elite forces of the Shadow Blades were not to be taken lightly, not with the large containers of non-magical weaponry they had arrived with. But they had forsaken surprise by sending some of their numbers to humiliate a few Ministry officials. The Aurors and the Hit-Wizards answering to London were not the brightest minds of the Wizarding World, but they had a good idea of what they were about to face, and the DMLE had trained its members to cast vampire-killing spells by the dozens. When it turned to war, and it was going to come to that sooner or later, the personnel of the Ministry was going to have light spells and incantations which were sure to kill dozens each time they were cast. Rifles and other modern non-magical death instruments were powerful, but wand-wielding beings could conjure powerful shields to prevent most of the ammunition from piercing their flesh.

“He may or he may not,” philosophically relied her interlocutor. “My husband doesn’t really care, and I don’t think your Mistress does either.”

Lily didn’t open her mouth to confirm it; her silence was all the acknowledgement the other ivory-skinned vampire needed.

Sapphire eyes met emerald ones and the two women smiled before embracing each other.

“I missed you, Lily.”

“I missed you, Artemis.”

The High Sentinel sniffed haughtily, creating a sound and showing an expression the redhead vampire was unable to properly replicate.

“Are you sure it’s not our large marital bed you missed?” the older *Vampiri Romani* teased.

“Well, now that you mentioned it...”

Artemis chuckled before releasing her embrace.

“Dawn is coming soon. Let’s talk business before pleasure.”

**10 April 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Who is the spy of the Exchequer?”

It was a frustrating question, if only because of how many times the Exiled had failed to find a plausible answer in the last months.

“We know the Exchequer is an organisation of Dark Wizards,” Morag pointed out. “So if they went for the obvious, it could be Snape. If a third of the rumours about him are true, our Senior Professor of Potions knows more Dark Curses than the average prisoner of Azkaban.”

“And it’s not a secret he did some spying in the last war,” Nigel seemed to have no problem with the idea his least favourite Professor had his identity usurped by a criminal. “Even if it’s discovered he’s a triple or a four-way agent, so what? People will think it’s in his nature...”

Hermione nodded. Alexandra didn’t. Oh, the reasoning was fine, but for some reason the idea tasted wrong in her mouth.

“I think...I think I don’t believe it’s Snape because few people will confide in him or want to share their secrets in his presence,” the green-eyed teenager said out loud. “Look at the stuff he did during the Potions Preliminary. As the Head of Slytherin, he had to know that not warning some of his Snakes was going to make sure he would be distrusted by the House as a whole.”

Tracey and Blaise certainly were nowhere near forgiving him for that stunt, and according to Daphne, House Slytherin’s support of the Potion Master was at an all-time low.

“We only have the word of our former DADA teacher that ‘Nightmare’ is a spy,” Morag shrugged. “If he lied to us or was tricked himself, the ‘Nightmare’ spy could very well be less an information-gatherer and more an assassin or a chaos agent. Acting like an overgrown bat or causing despair would be the perfect attitude to have, with those mission orders.

“I can’t say you’re wrong,” Alexandra was forced to confess. “For me, Snape is still too obvious. I think McGonagall may be the spy we seek. Her behaviour during certain crises was strange.”

“She received a lot of shocks after the Ravenclaw-Gryffindor Quidditch game,” Nigel told her in a tone which made it clear he wasn’t sharing her doubts. “And Dumbledore is always speaking and meeting with her. You think the Exchequer has a spy that good?”

The Potter Heiress grimaced. There was no denying this was the wall where her theory was stopped cold. McGonagall was often in a meeting or a conference with Dumbledore, this was simply part of the duties of a Deputy Headmistress. And if Dumbledore wasn’t able to realise a witch he knew for more than four decades was either manipulated or outright replaced by an imposter, how were younger students with none of this knowledge supposed to notice the difference?

“It’s always the same issue, over and over again. We have no proof, save the word of the Butcher of Dresden. And the four Heads of House regularly meet each other.”

There were other possibilities, of course. Professors Snape, McGonagall, Sprout, and Flitwick were hardly the only teachers inside the castle. But how one was supposed to know if one was a spy or not? Binns’ droning voice guaranteed you slept hearing it, and asking the magical ectoplasm if he was a spy was a waste of time. Trelawney was a fraud and known to drink several bottles of alcohol when the ‘visions of the future’ multiplied.

A teacher may be paid or influenced by the Exchequer, but Alexandra or the Exiled didn’t know for sure.

“We aren’t making any progress on this,” she told the other Ravenclaws sitting around the table. “Is there another subject of importance we need to discuss?”

Hermione’s hand rose up immediately, and the thirteen-year-old witch had to banish the urge to not look to the ceiling and roll her eyes. There were times they thought they had managed to fracture Hermione’s respect for figures of authority. Today was not one of these times.

“I wondered if you could explain to me a bit what the Old Powers are?”

Or maybe not. Maybe they had achieved it too well. This was not a subject their friend had manifested an interest in before.

“Morag, privacy charms, please. Nigel, if you want to leave, now is the moment.”

But the auburn-haired boy didn’t move. So he and Hermione had spoken about this beforehand, then.

“That’s a very difficult question, you realise,” she continued after adding a few sound barriers with her wand. “What are the Powers? I think hundreds of thousands of wizards and witches have tried to answer this very question in the last millennia.”

“Your best guess will be enough,” the bushy-haired Ravenclaw pursed her lips.

“As far as I’ve been able to discover, the Powers are the very foundations of magic and everything which sustains this world. They are the prayers and the power of human belief made real mixed with the power of the earth and the air which surrounds us.” Alexandra smiled. “Assuming the hints and the information Morag and I have been able to get our hands on are true, of course.”

“And...err...how many of these Powers are there?”

“Thirteen,” that was an easy question, at least. “Six are for the Dark: Death, Chaos, Desire, War, Confusion, and Corruption. Seven are for the Light: Life, Wisdom, Innocence, Unity, Order, Judgement, and Fate.”

“That doesn’t sound...balanced.”

“There are rumours that an eternity ago, Fate was neutral and the arbiter between the twelve others,” Morag intervened. “Then something went extremely wrong. Since then, the Light has the advantage.”

“Now, normally these Powers can’t intervene in the affairs of mortals directly. Really, they can’t present themselves to powerful wizards as they truly are. They exist on a plane of reality which is different than ours, and so they...the shards of the Powers arrive under the form of Aspects, a name and a domain which are coalesced in a divine form. Care to guess some of the same names?”

“Zeus? Odin?”

“Among many, many others,” the Champion of the Morrigan said after nodding. After a moment of reflection, she decided that telling Hermione how bad the Ministry and most of the Wizard World had screwed up by banning the worship of the Old Powers could wait for another day.

“Obviously, since the Powers couldn’t fight each other without destroying everything and everyone, they had to empower mortals to fight their battles. Thus were born the first champions.”

“A game where humans are the pawns,” Nigel didn’t sound impressed.

“A game where the Light wants to always win, even if it leads us to the end of our world,” Alexandra corrected before shaking her head. “Anyway, the rumour goes that anytime a Champion dies, another Champion is chosen by the same Power, though the Aspect is supposed to pass to another.”

“An example?”

Alexandra turned her head to look at Morag.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but one could easily see a Champion of Ishtar die, and be succeeded by a witch blessed by Bellona, and then the mantle would go to a worshipper of Huitzilopochtli?”

“Easily,” the red-haired girl confirmed.

“That sounds...barbaric.”

Alexandra would be lying if she said she had not anticipated this remark.

“Champions don’t necessarily serve for life, Hermione. In fact, a majority in the tales and legends which survived to reach us affirm it is rather rare for anyone to have a mantle for several decades. A Power can judge you worthy to become a Champion and withdraw the mantle after a day and a year. Or it can last you twice or ten times that amount of time. There’s no way to know in advance.”

The member of the Army of the Light who had died at Hogsmeade had been rather old and died a Champion, though. But the Potter Heiress wasn’t going to shed a tear for his demise. The fanatic had come to kill her; this bigot had reaped what he had sown.

“And a Champion can recognise another Champion?” Hermione asked.

“Yes,” Alexandra said. “Assuming the other Champion is sufficiently close.” It ensured that the two could recognise each other quickly. The Dark Queen and she had instinctively known what the other was. “Though only the Power is revealed, not the Aspect. Do you have something in mind?”

Lyudmila Romanov was the Champion of Chaos, but the Potter Heiress ignored which divine aspect had chosen her in this era.

“Perhaps,” the older girl said in a noncommittal manner. “Can the Powers of one side can choose the same person?”

The Basilisk-Slayer blinked.

“Yes, but it would be a waste of effort. There’s a limit to how much your magical core can grow before your body is unable to handle all the magic.” Then she realised why her friend had asked. “No, good try, but this isn’t how the most dangerous members of the Exchequer have gotten so powerful.”

“How did they, then?”

“If the Light was able to answer that question, those Dark Wizards wouldn’t be alive right now...”

**15 April 1994, Durmstrang**

There were four girls waiting at the same table in the heart of the Monster-Hunter Guild, and one of them clearly wondered what she was doing here.

Astrid wondered if it was bad that she didn’t include herself in this category.

*To be mad with fear is not a symptom of insanity when the Dark Queen is near*.

An old German student had uttered these words five years ago and they had rapidly become famous. It helped that the loudmouth who had spoken them had required a lot of effort from the Healers to ensure it would be able to eat anything more than soup.

But back to the four witches which had been invited into the guilds’ headquarters. For honesty if nothing else, Astrid wasn’t going to pretend they had much in common save their excellent grades and the fact the Dark Queen had chosen them to be her advising council for the Tournament.

Because, yes, let’s stay serious, Lyudmila Romanov didn’t need potential replacements or other people to step in her shoes if something went wrong.

Of all the teenagers gathered here, Roksana Vulchanova was the oldest. Dark brown hair and dark eyes, the Russian witch was one of the many descendants of House Vulchanova, which was noted for its impressive wealth and its undying loyalty to the Imperial House. An elegant nose and large lips on her aristocratic traits coupled with a ballerina complexion would have made her rather attractive for the hot-blooded Durmstrang males, if Roksana’s specialty in the Dark Arts wasn’t Necromancy.

Tenth in line for House Vulchanova, seventeen years-old, and several Russian official departments had already hired her to clean up some particularly nasty messes.

Then there was Katharina Feuerbach. The sixteen-year-old German was a prodigy like Vulchanova, but managed to have little points in common with her. Light brown hair, light blue eyes, Feuerbach was always smiling and laughing, and the list of boys she dated or slept with was impressive. Only a fool would not have taken her seriously. Most of the jewels and objects the curvy witch wore were Alchemy-forged, and even her robes were heavily enchanted. House Feuerbach had massive influence in Prussia, Germany, Bavaria, and Moravia, and wealth-wise they weren’t exactly lightweights. How much further up they could climb once their seventh-in-line daughter became a full time Dark Alchemist was one of those interesting political questions it was best not to ask.

Astrid for herself was fifteen, Heiress of House Sverre, and specialised in Fel Magic – or as some narrow-minded Light fools preferred to call it, the Dark manipulation of Ley Lines.

And the youngest member of the assembly was Irina Sydorenko, fourteen years-old, although she didn’t look like it. The Ukrainian witch was nearly as tall as Katharina Feuerbach, and her elaborated hairstyle and her dark blue eyes gave her a more mature expression than she should be able to present to the world. Her family had been ruined by the fines imposed on them when they sided with Grindelwald. Oh, and she was known to be the most gifted Blood Mage of Durmstrang in the last decade.

For all their differences, they all rose when the door opened and Lyudmila walked in at a brisk pace.

“I’ve arranged things with the High Master, Irina. Congratulations, you will be part of my group for the Tournament.”

To say the Ukrainian Heiress reacted positively to this news would have been greatly stretching the truth.

“I was telling you I was going to consider your proposal,” the younger teenager growled.

“Ten thousand Galleons for the year, five tomes of Blood Magic, and one lab for your studies,” the Dark Queen didn’t even bother looking at her or showing for a single instant that she was annoyed. “I want you in my service fifteen days per month, with each additional day paid two thousand Galleons. Outside of regular hours, I don’t care what you do as long as it doesn’t cause problems with legal authorities. You sleep with who you want, you bleed and experiment on who or what you want. Well?”

“Damn you,” Irina closed her eyes in defeat. For most of the upper-class students of Durmstrang, this would be nice pocket money, for an impoverished family like Sydorenko, it was a lot of gold they desperately needed to not fall into the abyss of financial ruin and bankruptcy. “Fine, I accept. But I want a standard contract with blood signatures!”

“Obviously,” the older blonde-haired Dark Witch of the room declared.

“By pure curiosity, how did you convince Karkaroff to add to our ranks a girl who didn’t participate in the first three preliminaries?” asked Katharina with one of her trademark smiles.

“I could tell you I can be really persuasive,” Lyudmila replied with a thin smile, “but the poor High Master is under a lot of criticism from several important witches who had the honour of being alumni of our school. They wanted at least three or four more witches in the Champions’ selection. My request to have one more seat for a girl is arriving at the best moment from his perspective. Of course Irina will have to participate in the last two preliminaries and get at least a few points.”

“The boys won’t protest?” inquired Roksana.

“Why should I care about their opinion?” the green-eyed Dark Queen sniffed haughtily.

“With my deepest respect,” Astrid intervened, “there is a real possibility the Tournament will force Champions of the same school to unite their strengths in the same team.”

There were going to be individual tasks of course, but collective ones weren’t impossible. The public loved it for Quidditch and popular games, and the judges would have a finer appreciation of the leadership and teamwork skills of each boy and girl.

Unfortunately, as one couldn’t fail to notice, teamwork wasn’t exactly Lyudmila Romanov’s greatest strength.

To her credit, the most dangerous student of Durmstrang appeared to consider her words for a couple of minutes before nodding.

“Fine, I will warn them. Not that Krum will mind, I suspect. Except his current girlfriend, none of his friends are participating in the preliminaries.”

“Krum has a girlfriend?” Roksana raised her eyes from what looked to be Dark Arts’ homework. “You aren’t speaking about his broom, are you?”

The other four girls rolled their eye in a concerted move.

“Yes, Krum has a girlfriend, Vulchanova,” Irina intervened. “I thought everyone at school was aware of it, but evidently I was mistaken.”

“It’s not like it’s worth learning her name,” Katharina argued. “With the number of fan-girls throwing themselves at him now that he’s the Seeker of the Bulgarian team, I have no doubt this one will last long as the others.”

“I defer to your expertise,” the Russian Necromancer sardonically spoke. “Besides, Krum is only in the lead because twice out of three times, he managed to either summon or to conjure a broom to end in second place.”

“At least he’s playing his strengths, unlike some idiots I won’t mention,” the Dark Queen remarked. “So far, the two Champions who have been opposed to me are massive failures.”

This time none of the witches raised her voices to disagree with her.

Champions of Magic were supposed to be impressive and redoubtable even if severely outnumbered. One had only to look at her cousin Alexandra Potter, who had killed two Basilisks, or Lyudmila Romanov, who had managed to become the youngest leader of the Monster-Hunter Guild and had pulverised duelling and academic records since her entrance at Durmstrang. Even that bitch Delacour at Beauxbatons, was talented, despite her irrational views on the Light and the Dark.

The other Champions living in the underground halls of Durmstrang...weren’t.

If Lyudmila had not confirmed to them after the first preliminary that Yegor Poliakov was the Champion of Seth – and thus of the power of Confusion – Astrid wouldn’t have believed it. And the less said about Frode Falk, Champion of Frigg and Wisdom, the better. The older boy was purely and simply a screw-up.

How bad was it for them? The answer was terrible: at the time this conversation was taking place, neither of the two were going to be the starting champions of the Tournament, and Falk was in eighteenth place, in other words he wasn’t even assured to go visit the Italians and the Venetians.

“They may incite you to lower your guard,” the German aristocrat suggested in a tone which betrayed the fact she didn’t believe a single word of it. “Otherwise there are the other Champions of Regina, Beauxbatons, and of course Astrid’s cousin.”

“I hope so,” the small sentence was relatively surprising given the feelings poured into it. “This competition has to be challenging; I have no interest in boring myself to death in balls and politics for nine months. Now give me what you have been able to find on the fourth preliminary.”

“According to my sources, it’s going to be the Trial of Water this time. And two Norwegian preserves have been contacted to loan their krakens...”

**17 April 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Where are you buying all this food? I know the House Elves in the kitchens have no Butterbeer and with Hogsmeade under reconstruction, we can’t exactly go buy there...”

“The Weasley Twins.”

“Ah. And how are they supplying half the castle?”

“I’ve no idea,” Alexandra smiled. “By an interesting coincidence though, the first of this month was the date of their seventeenth birthday. And when you are a legal adult...”

“You can go to the Ministry and get your Apparition license,” Susan finished. “Of course. But how are they going out of the castle and coming back without being noticed?”

Alexandra gave an incredulous look to her girlfriend.

“The security of this castle sucks, my dear Badger. And of all the boys and girls breaking the curfew, none are better at it than Fred and George.”

“It’s not that bad...” Alexandra raised an eyebrow. “Okay it’s not brilliant, but there are some teachers and DMLE personnel who patrol around the castle.”

“Yes. And since they rarely change the schedule and the places they go after a while, you can use a watch and guess exactly where the Professors will be at any given hour. Besides, a lot of teachers haven’t the first clue where most of the secret passages and shortcuts are. Sorry, but they are no match for the Weasley Twins.”

“Hum,” Susan pouted, something the Hydra Animagus found adorable and they returned to eating the picnic she had in part taken from the kitchens and in part bought from certain illegal parties.

The decoration around them was sadly not as good as the food; the black-haired Ravenclaw had planned for a lunch outside the school, but the rain had invited itself today for a spring pour, and so an abandoned wing of the castle where no one was at risk to come was where they had found refuge.

“You’re not disappointed with me?” the red-haired Hufflepuff asked after a moment. “I could have done far better in the preliminaries, and now I’m almost eliminated...”

“I told you before, as long as you beat Zachariah, I’m happy,” the two chuckled, though Susan did more forcefully. “But no, I’m not disappointed with you. First, you aren’t eliminated yet.”

“I’m far closer to elimination than being designated as a champion, and we both know it.”

Since the twenty points her girlfriend had won placed her in eighth position, pretending the contrary would be extremely difficult without lying.

“Macmillan has won seventy points in a single preliminary and is in fourth place overall. But if you believe you can’t handle our good friend Ernie...”

“Of course, I can handle him!” Susan protested before showing her a melancholic expression. “I...I just don’t know, Alexandra. Every day we hear rumours from the other school’s preliminaries. Every day we hear the future competition is fighting monsters and duels to the death to be selected as champions...I am afraid. I am not brave like you.”

“Susan...” the Ravenclaw witch rose to place herself behind Susan and massage her shoulders. “Most of the spectacular things I’ve done in and outside this school...I was terrified when I did them.”

“Liar,” the Badger retorted.

“No,” the Potter Heiress insisted, caressing the red hair of her girlfriend. “When I have time to think, I am afraid. The only thing I can advise in this kind of situation is to fight it, and focus on everything that can get you out of danger. As long as you aren’t paralysed by fear, you can keep a calm head and find solutions to get out of danger. If you’re calm and clear-headed, at least a third of the work is done.”

“You’re not...disappointed I won’t be with you next year?”

Alexandra lowered herself to steal a kiss before stopping the move mere inches before reaching the intended target.

“Like I said before, first, you’re not out of the race, so stop the apologies here and now. Second, in the unlikely case my beautiful Badger is eliminated, I will remind you I can Apparate and there are many events in a Tournament, like I don’t know...Balls and Tasks? Yes, there will be plenty of opportunities for some Hogwarts students to come support the champions and provide nice distractions.”

The potential Ravenclaw champion grinned.

“I can promise I would be very, very disappointed in you if you failed to show up at the end of the First Task to celebrate my exploits. Just a hypothetical example, my dear.”

“And one filled with modesty,” whispered the Bones Heiress.

“I will let you know,” Alexandra declared in false mockery, “I am a true paragon of virtue and humility, a Goddess of modesty, a-“

Susan kissed her, and the rest of her speech was promptly forgotten.

**Author’s note**: Support Cedric Diggory, the Hufflepuff Champion!

Now all the Houses have done three preliminaries, and the end of the school year is near. It took me longer than I thought, but we’re finally in the last line of the Hogwarts’ third year. I’m not going to make promises I can’t keep, but this arc should be finished before the end of the (real) year.

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