**Chapter 73**

**Beltane Preparations**

**15 April 1994, Somewhere in Dorset, England**

If there was one thing Alexandra was sure of, it was that the current Head of Slytherin at Hogwarts had learned nothing of his predecessor’s decoration methods.

Now that she had walked to the dungeons of Hogwarts for more than two and a half years, the Potter Heiress was familiar with the kind of decorations Professors Snape and Whitehead considered ‘normal’.

This was an intimidating atmosphere, to say the least. It was all the more impressive since when you arrived at Hogwarts, you were eleven-years-old, and not necessarily used to being afraid or looking for enemies in the shadows. No, the Potions classes weren’t a welcoming environment at all. The lighting wasn’t bad, but it was inferior to what was taken for granted in Charms and Transfiguration. The cauldrons were clean, but they were black and placed in positions to appear as mysterious and uninviting as possible. The wardrobes containing the ingredients were dark. The jars, the vials, and the pictures were particularly sinister-looking, when they didn’t contain things no one had ever demanded from their teachers the true name of. And then there were the Professors themselves, who, even not being a member of Gryffindor House, had always been unpopular members of the staff.

There was none of that here in Dorset. Roughly eight hundred metres after leaving the main road - in reality more like a very rural path few cars had ever tried to use – the landscape was full of flowers and grass with little coves providing some shadow. And the more she walked, the less Alexandra could see common points with the Slytherin theme of the dungeons. When she passed under the first arch of stone – a seemingly natural one, but which had been obviously shaped by magic – the profusion of flowers and trees became even more prominent.

Weather wards and notice-me-not enchantments danced around her, and while the temperature didn’t change, the very air seemed more fragrant, more...magical. Not being in a hurry, the Ravenclaw third-year took the time appreciate the landscape before following the new path of white stone which had appeared in front of her. A small gust of wind, one giving a shadow of the mildly distant sea, was caressing her clothes and her skin.

Clearly, a great deal of forethought had been made when planning to welcome visitors. Immediately on the right, there were a dozen or so menhirs, and each one had been patiently carved with thousands of runes to allow the Ley line underneath to disperse and return its blessings. Alexandra didn’t even need to be conscious about it; the place was almost singing its joy and love of the ancient cycle to everyone who might pass nearby. On the left, in a warded enclosure, five bicorns were ruminating and gave her a disinterested look before returning to more interesting animal preoccupations.

Step after step, many vegetable gardens were revealed between fruit trees, except that of course, the ‘vegetables’ were all herbs and relatively common Potion ingredients, and the fruits had been mentioned to be excellent meals for a lot of insects, reptiles, and birds whose parts, be they scales or feathers, were used as fundamental ingredients in the Hogwarts Potions curriculum.

The school’s greenhouses were of course bigger, but there weren’t many of them compared to the ‘ingredients’ squares’ Alexandra could see, and there was a lot of space left in fallow. Plus there was no evident limit to this Wizarding domain, as hills and small trees formed a flexible but noticeable frontier on both sides of the white stone stairs.

The last point which had to be noted, and not the least, was that many species were busy working on the future Potions ingredients and the trees. The House-elves had been somewhat a given, but there were also Leprechauns and Pixies – though the latter were a green-shade variety and did not appear to share the same aggressive and destructive behaviour the ones Lockhart had trapped into a cage and ‘shown’ them in his first lesson of DADA.

It was certainly one of the symbiotic exchanges Morag was fond of explaining when the Old Ways were mentioned. To be sure the elves here were better clothed and appeared to be bigger and tougher than the ones the Basilisk-Slayer had been able to observe at Hogwarts and Zabini Manor.

And then there was the manor at the end of the stairs, surrounded by small trees and islands of flowers. It was three stories tall, and presented an air of...affability and satisfaction, as much as one building could be said to show human traits. The large windows all facing the south, the white stones, and the several echelons of lawn descending with the stairs emphasized it nicely.

It suited well the man waiting on a chair in front of the house, who was singing and adding flower after flower to a cauldron on the tiny table next to the chairs.

The moment she took a step onto one of the marble steps – this one polished as close to a mirror as it was possible with magic – Horace Slughorn turned his head in her direction. Huh, even trying to sense it, Alexandra couldn’t feel the proximity-ward or the artifice which had given the alert.

“Do you like my humble abode, Miss Potter?” the former Head of House Slytherin asked as she finished climbing the last steps and levitated his half-full cauldron towards the door where a House-elf caught it and disappeared with the ‘prize’.

“I do,” the raven-haired girl answered. “Though I’m not sure I would use the word ‘humble’...”

On the one hand, it was definitely less flamboyant and awe-inspiring than Zabini Manor or Hogwarts. It was more humble, yes. But she was not blind to the fact that a lot of Galleons must have been necessary to arrive at this rather eye-pleasing result.

“But you have very attractive gardens.”

“Thank you,” the large Potion Masters beamed, “it’s always good to see young wizards and witches interested in anything which isn’t a Quidditch or duellist stadium. May I offer you some refreshments?”

“Yes, orange juice or apple juice please, if you have any,” the Potter Heiress politely answered. After an Apparition across the length of Britain and this walk, she was quite thirsty.

Horace Slughorn returned to the chair he had momentarily left, and Alexandra sat down on the one directly on the other side of the table once invited. Moments later, one of the green pixies brought two glasses and a carafe of orange juice, as well as a bottle which was certainly alcohol.

“I’m always partial to some Thunderschnaps,” the large moustache did not shake as the confession was made.

“I’m...I’m afraid I have no idea what sort of alcohol you’re speaking about,” the Ravenclaw third-year admitted.

“Hardly surprising,” the bald and portly wizard shook his head. “It is a German spirit drink, this particular bottle is distilled with apricot and thunder-berries. Being a responsible adult, I’m of course sorry to inform you I will not be able to offer you a bottle before your sixteenth birthday.”

The Potion Masters chuckled and Alexandra surprised herself to imitate him. For all the suspicions she had about any older wizard with unclear agendas, there was something about him that was eternally jovial and happy.

“I was surprised to see you answer positively to my invitation so soon,” the ex-Professor said after a few seconds sipping their drinks that the pixies had served them in a concert of chirps and trills. “As I understand it, Albus forbid excursions outside the school and Friday is usually a class-day for every student not having passed his OWLs.”

“Let’s just say,” Alexandra smiled and speaking each word slowly, “that the combination of the Battle of Hogsmeade and other incidents, plus the arrival of a new semester of course, has upturned our weekly schedule for the worse. We were informed on Monday we had a double dose of History this afternoon, and I didn’t fancy taking a nap.”

It wasn’t supposed to be possible in the first place, but every time she was in the presence of Binns, the green-eyed witch had the feeling the ghost was getting worse. Maybe it was her imagination playing a trick on her mind. Maybe it wasn’t. Alas, one way or another, the droning on the Goblin Rebellions and the Giant Wars was getting more and more unbearable.

“As for the interdiction to leave the castle without a guardian’s permission and presence, the Headmaster should know better about giving orders he has not the means to enforce. My guardian knows what I’m doing, and that’s enough for me.”

“I see,” this was all Horace Slughorn said before drinking the rest of his glass in little sips.

“I can’t say I am astonished by his methods,” he continued, touching one of the green buttons on his red waistcoat, “as long as I’ve known him, Albus Dumbledore didn’t strike me as someone who really understood children. There were already problems with his personality when he was Transfiguration Professor and Head of House Gryffindor.”

“Really?” This was definitely news to her.

“Really,” confirmed Slughorn. “Of course, it was largely before your grandparents’ time...few wizards and witches continued to voice their disapproval of him once he had beaten Gellert Grindelwald. Defeating a Dark Lord is sure to bury a quantity of sins, and defeating this one was seen as an unparalleled feat by the people of Britain. Even the ICW, which should have known better, gave him the post of Supreme Mugwump shortly after the war officially ended.”

Slughorn poured himself a second glass of Thunderschnaps.

“And I think none of what I’ve said really surprised you, Miss Potter.”

“You’re right,” Alexandra agreed. “Since the Butcher of Dresden was our DADA Professor for a few months, I spent several days reading some unbiased books which described the Grindelwald War in detail.”

It had not made for pleasant reading, needless to say. It was one thing to already have a good idea that Voldemort was crazy and relatively unsuccessful compared to the Dark Lord who died at Hogsmeade; it was quite another to have some of the bloody details of Grindelwald’s victories. Nations had been forced to surrender when their entire Auror or battle-wizards equivalents were killed in atrocious manners, entire Houses had been utterly wiped out, maps had been remodelled, and city-sized Memory-Removal Charms had to be cast around to prevent the non-magical population from becoming aware of the bloodbath.

Slughorn nodded at this, his face very serious for the occasion.

“And I’m sure that since Rincewind is not known for being tight-lipped, you have a question.”

“Yes, I have.” The girl most of Hogwarts nicknamed the Exiled Queen frowned. “Are you a member of the organisation sometimes known as the Exchequer?”

When it came down to it, there had always been the issue as to how her mother had been aware of this Dark Wizards’ gathering in the first place. Lilian Evans was Muggle-born, and if her sister’s life was any indication, she had not left England before the end of her school years. And since the local Dark Wizards – also known as the Death Eaters – were not going to be anything more than allies of convenience at best and canon-fodder at worse, there were few information sources to be gained there.

No, her mother would only have been able to contact the Exchequer if said organisation already had a member at Hogwarts. And since the favourite teachers of the now-vampire were Horace Slughorn and Filius Flitwick, it was either one or the other who was responsible. And her Charms Professor and Head of House had drawn his wand a lot when she was present, without any sign his magic had the ‘taste of darkness’.

“I am,” Slughorn spoke without hesitation. “Was it Lily’s membership that gave you the clue?”

“Yes.”

The Potions Master nodded thoughtfully while courteously replenishing her glass with orange juice.

“I thought it would be a clue once I was warned,” the former Head of Slytherin said. “I would thank you to not spread the news all over Britain. I am an old man, Miss Potter, and I love my comfort and my tranquility.”

This made Alexandra raise an eyebrow and show him an ironic smile.

“No offence, Professor Slughorn, but assuming I paid a journalist of the *Daily Prophet* to accuse you of Dark Wizardry in the first place, I doubt I would be taken seriously. I don’t think it is an insult to say that right now, you’re not exactly presenting the image one thinks of when the words ‘Dark Lord’ are mentioned.”

“No offence taken,” the former Hogwarts teacher smiled. “It is, I think, why I’ve been able to convince the Army of Light and the Trinity to leave me alone for so long. Well that, and in my younger years, I’ve taught them a few painful lessons which ensured my appearance is still feared by their old greybeards. A Potion is not the most offensive-oriented type of magic in existence, but given sufficient preparation time, it can be absolutely devastating.”

A House Elf materialised on top of the table with a box of candies, and offered one to Alexandra before his master took it and began swallowing the sweets one after another with non-feigned pleasure.

“One thing I don’t understand is...why? I mean, I read the books which mention you at Hogwarts. You are an internationally renowned Potions Master! You are a teacher with a very large network of former students who love you! Why side with an organisation of...”

“The books, at least in my case, are completely and utterly wrong, Miss Potter,” Horace Slughorn winked in good humour. “I am far older than any book thinks me; Potions allow truly marvellous things, and while I can’t pretend I ever equalled my colleague Nicholas Flamel, the Philosopher’s Stone is neither the only nor the easiest path to centuries of youth and near-immortality.”

The old wizard huffed, a move which almost broke his clothes around his formidable belly.

“Potions are a field most Light-governments are always too eager to restrict, Miss Potter, and I was born a few decades after the Statute, in an era when the restrictions were very severe,” Alexandra could not help but show her stupefaction; that would make Slughorn at least between two and three hundred years old! “I wanted to change the world with my Potions. I wanted to break the safeguards, discover cures, and prove the bigots who had somehow managed to block all research that their efforts to make us ignorant and as narrow-minded as them were doomed to fail. I began to study Black Philtres and other forbidden avenues of research. And when I was forced to flee in exile when some of my activities were discovered, the Exchequer promised me protection, money, and useful contacts to realise my dreams.”

“This...” Alexandra was a bit anxious at how easy the wizard in front of her managed to make it logical and sane. “I’ve met the fanatics of the Army of Light myself, but surely there’s another solution besides joining...joining them.”

The ex-Hogwarts Professor gave her a sympathetic look.

“There are other solutions of course today, but it is best not to forget that in great part, the weakness of the Light this decade is due to the long-term plans of the Exchequer and the Dark Lords they have sponsored in the past. Without this organisation, Europe and most of the world would be living in a delightful sea of stagnation and mediocrity where pure-bloods would play the role of nobles and the rest of the population would be second-class citizens. Most of the reforms of the Light, including the Statute of Secrecy, have been done because of the threat the Exchequer represented in their eyes. Without us, there would have been no invention of the Blood-replenishing Potion, no Skelegro, and no Veritaserum.”

Alexandra wasn’t sure how even a few good acts could justify something like the destruction of Brise-Roc and other monstrous actions, but the Potions Master hadn’t finished his tirade.

“But in the end, one of the main reasons Dark Wizards tend to join the Exchequer is the same reason I did: security, money, and influence.” Slughorn shrugged. “Swearing your allegiance to the King and helping him accomplish his plans in exchange has never been the worst of deals.”

“Even if it forced you to become a Potions Master for decades at Hogwarts?”

The aged man’s smile transformed into full-blown laughter.

“I was the one who wanted to teach at Hogwarts, Miss Potter, not the King, not the Queen, or any of my colleagues. I wanted to teach, and so I applied for the position. My duties in service of the organisation left me a lot of free time, and I wanted to give new experiences to the younger generations.”

This was...fine, it was not what she had expected at all. From the very beginning, she had imagined Slughorn was a long-term spy like Devkins. But it was apparently not true, and the old wizard had no reason to lie to her. It wasn’t like misleading her would lead to one earth-shattering consequence one way or another.

“My apologies then,” the green-eyed girl said. “I made the assumption, based on the information available to me, you were in the walls as part of a spying-recruiting effort.”

The Exchequer agent smiled before placing a hand over a pastry which had just materialised in an empty plate.

“I won’t deny some spying was committed while I was teaching at Hogwarts, but it wasn’t as much as one imagined. I rapidly opposed Dumbledore for reasons which have as much to do as my allegiance as they have with my ideals, and this stance didn’t make me the most popular Professor around. As for recruiting, the only teenager I openly recruited was your mother. And I had to ask for the permission of the King beforehand; I was not supposed to do any recruiting at all, courtesy of certain...circumstances I won’t reveal.”

Then the pastry proceeded to succumb to the large appetite of the Potion Master.

The conversation had been at the very least interesting, but while it was not yet the time to return to Hogwarts, Alexandra hadn’t several hours of free time ahead of her.

“I don’t suppose you will be surprised to hear the most important reason I came to visit you here is my...subpar performance in the Potion preliminary and finding a way to remedy it.”

“I would not exactly describe it as subpar,” Slughorn said, shaking a finger in denegation. “Severus placed the mark too high for his preliminary. In complete honesty, I think his own talent in the Art of Potions did him a grave disservice; even a real Tournament task would have offered some clues to the Champions beforehand. When I taught NEWT-level students, I certainly didn’t expect them to brew a Potion to perfection during their first attempt. And I would not have decided to organise a trial of free brewing without a lot of warning and several hours of instruction and advice! No, this Potions Preliminary was hardly one what will expect of you during the Tournament.”

“I will still be at a disadvantage,” Alexandra remarked after a nod to accept these arguments. “Having clues about what must be done won’t do me a lot of good if I’m busy learning the fourth-year curriculum while the brewing level is at sixth-year or equivalent.”

“A good argument,” accepted the former Head of Slytherin. “I presume you are interested in some tutoring?”

“I am,” the Potter Heiress admitted. “Unless of course you have the name of another Potion Master I can learn from and who you can guarantee is not going to run to Dumbledore or a pardoned Death Eater every time I open my mouth to express a political opinion.”

The Potion field was a very politicised arena, according to her magical guardian, and putting Snape in control of the Potions department at Hogwarts had not helped things. As for the other schools of Britain, all but one had teachers with strong Light-aligned sympathies, and the Guild of Potions Masters was infamous for being neatly divided between Light and Dark. It went without saying it was the bigoted-Death Eater version of the Dark which was preponderant.

“No, most of my former Apprentices and best contacts are on the continent and do not speak English,” Horace Slughorn recognised. Her surprise must have been more noticeable than she thought, because the Exchequer agent rapidly developed his point. “Language Potions can only do so much when tutoring and doing extensive studies in the field of Potions. When I taught teenagers, I preferred the lessons to be made in the mother tongue of the student I was tutoring. It allowed me to skip certain mistakes. But no, in answer to your question, I have no name in Britain to give you that you might accept without reservation. The best choice, in term of brewing talent, would have been Severus, but the preliminary convinced me beyond doubt he did not grow more social and apt to teach children in the last decade.”

The grumbling which was lost in the silvery moustache was something like ‘what was the old goat thinking’ or something strangely sounding like it.

“He was a dear friend of your mother, you know.”

“I was given a few hints that their friendship existed, but Professor Snape didn’t try to open the subject, and...well...he’s not exactly a man I feel confident speaking with.” And this wasn’t just because the current Head of Slytherin was rumoured to be a spy of Dumbledore. The ‘dungeon bat’, as the Gryffindors loved to call him, was not exactly the type of teacher she wanted to speak to once the bell tolled. As disheartening as it was to think about it, Alexandra had probably spoken in a more heartfelt manner with Horace Slughorn today than with Severus Snape in three years. “In fact, the most important things I know about my mother come from Professor Flitwick, not him.”

“What a shame!” the ancient Potions Master proclaimed with genuine disappointment. “Despite their falling-out after fifth-year, I had hoped...ah, what a shame. Childhood friendships are too important to be broken by idiocies like blood-purity. Although if Severus failed egregiously to give you fond memories of your mother, I suppose it is my duty to fill this gap.”

And for the next hour, Slughorn proceeded to do exactly that. At first Alexandra was a bit dubious about what the Potions Professor could contribute, but she quickly changed her opinion. The ex-Head of House Slytherin had evidently seen her mother as his favourite student, allowing her to borrow some expensive books from his collection, providing ingredients for her experiments – or ‘free brewing’ as Slughorn called it – and past her second year, inviting her to certain events, be they inside or outside the school.

“I was supposed to take her as my Apprentice for her first Mastery and beyond,” Slughorn said frankly as he poured himself another drink. Despite having more or less emptied the bottle of Thunderschnaps on his own, Slughorn was not presenting the slightest sign of being inebriated. “But Dumbledore fired me from my position and plans had to be changed. Lily began to train for her Enchantress first...and against my advice, she decided to stay in Britain.”

And this decision had been fatal to her, even if it had not been permanent.

“Our Charms Master said we are both stubborn when we want to be,” Alexandra said lightly. “It must be in our blood.”

The Potions Master chuckled.

“I will not dare voice an opinion for or against it, the Evans temper is legendary,” the bald wizard drily said as he handed the empty boxes of sweets he had in great part devoured by himself to several green pixies. “Now back to the tutoring possibilities. I was given to understand you have already spoken with the Queen?”

Alexandra stopped smiling. There were certain subjects she wasn’t going to joke about, and the ultimatum she had received from the half-sister of King Arthur, the dreaded Queen of the Exchequer, was firmly grounded in this category.

“Yes,” she didn’t know what Morgana La Fay had told him, Slughorn was not forthcoming with his rank in the Exchequer’s hierarchy, but there was no point being tight-lipped given what he already knew. “I was...delivered an ultimatum, I suppose. Participate in the European Magical Tournament, or risk the Queen and her forces coming to Hogwarts to personally deal with my life and those of my friends along with everyone else. And should I win the Tournament, the Queen may consider me worthy of becoming her Apprentice.”

Horace Slughorn whistled and passed a hand through his moustache.

“That’s not exactly a small order,” by the looks of it, the Exchequer agent had not been aware of the exact terms of the Samhain conversation, “but then the Queen has always been famed for her high standards. Assuredly I think you have the strength to compete, but win?”

“I’m still undecided if I really want to be her Apprentice.” She could have pretended the contrary, but why bother? It wasn’t like she had already decided to see if the ultimatum was a bluff or the Dark Lady was unaware of where she was going to spend her time next year.

“True,” her interlocutor conceded. “Personally I would try my best to take this chance for the academic possibilities, but I understand there are moral and ideological choices going beyond that. Anyway, this simplifies things for my tutoring proposals. Starting mid-June, and until the European Magical Tournament is over, I am willing to tutor you in Potions three times per week. Each session will be, at least for the summer, between three and four hours-long in the morning. No need to worry about the costs, I will send half of the bill to your mother, and half to the Queen.”

This almost managed to return some hilarity to her chest and in her head.

“I suppose there are conditions.”

“It goes without saying,” approved the Potion Master. “I want punctuality, respect of the Potions’ hygiene and security rules, and of course, dedication. If a student wants to progress under my supervision, I don’t want to wait for him or her ten minutes past the agreed time every morning, nor do I want to chain someone to a cauldron. I have seen plenty of students in the same year as you who would be traumatised at the idea of staying in a Potions room three times per week.”

On this point he was totally right. Though with the damage Snape and Whitehead had caused, was it any wonder most of the Lions refused to see Potions as the fundamental course it was?

“Heavy focus on the practical?” she asked.

“There will be some theory,” amended the old wizard. “Assuming your progress is satisfactory, we might be able to finish the full OWLs program and begin introductions to some fascinating brews of sixth-year. I generally assign between five and seven books of mandatory reading, plus several Herbology lessons, but those are of a practical nature.”

And would likely take place here or in another of his properties, judging by the list of potential ingredients she had seen harvested and planted under her eyes.

“Oh, and obviously, I will prefer, with your permission, that we don’t speak of politics, ideologies and other potential topics that can induce...strife and other unpleasantness during the tutoring hours. I think we are both reasonable individuals, but it never ends well.”

This didn’t sound like a bad idea...and Alexandra wasn’t sure she would have wanted to speak of such potentially vital issues with him, anyway. As sympathetic as Slughorn was now, he was still a member of the Exchequer.

As for the tutoring, it was an advantage she couldn’t really afford to let go. What was she going to do, ask for Snape to give her lessons when he had never manifested the desire to do so and most of what she told him had a fairly good chance to arrive to the ears of the Headmaster in the next five minutes?

Besides, if Slughorn’s promises held true, there was an enticing likelihood that Potions could be a force instead of a weakness during the Tournament, and what the other Champions didn’t know had a good chance to provide her a decisive advantage.

“I accept.”

“Excellent!” A loud gong rang in the distance, and Slughorn looked at his watch with real surprise. “Oh dear, already so late? I’m afraid we are going to have to continue this conversation another day, I have another appointment after you, and I suppose you must return to Hogwarts...”

“Yes, I have to.” There were ways to enter the school even after the doors were closed for the night, but they also in general involved missing dinner and the teachers tended to notice those who failed to be present in the Great Hall, especially on the evenings of Friday and Saturday.

“Oh and of course...good luck for the last preliminary.”

**16 April 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Lavender is trying to use the Art of Divination to see if she can discover what the judges have planned in the last Preliminary.”

“I know that the times are hard, Fred, but I’ve heard better jokes from you this year,” Neville replied in a tired tone, his eyes not leaving the columns of Potion ingredients he was supposed to learn by heart for a certain horrible class on Tuesday.

Seriously – and no there was no pun behind this word – if Divination was useful for something, the future Longbottom Lord thought it was to trick the naive wizards into giving a few Galleons to the ‘Seers’, ‘Prophets’, and ‘Oracles’.

Maybe during summer he had not been aware of this truth, but it was now April of the Year of Grace 1994, and unfortunately or fortunately, Neville and most of the third-year Gryffindors were absolutely convinced Divination was a lot of bullshit, if you excused his language.

How many times had Trelawney announced his death when she looked at the bottom of his tea cup? A hundred? Two hundred? The first time, evidently, it was worrying. The second time, it was far more difficult to be afraid. And after that horrible Quidditch game where he had been wounded, that the infuriating woman had dared predict he would die of his wounds while he was healed in the infirmary wing, well the black-haired Lion had lost all respect for Trelawney.

He didn’t bother calling her Professor anymore. He wasn’t going to call Snape by this title, and at least the dungeon bat was teaching Potions between removals of House Points. In Divination, the only thing you learned was to stimulate your imagination and invent bewildering things that somehow, the fraud-teacher was always swallowing like they were lemons. The more horrifying the omen, the more deaths you predicted, the higher the grade you received.

This class was more pathetic than the coma-sleep Binns was inflicting to every class. That was saying something, no?

“I’m afraid my ugly twin wasn’t joking this time, oh Neville,” George called.

Figuring the rising noise meant he wasn’t going to be able to concentrate, Neville turned his head in the direction of the third-year girls, and sure enough Lavender, Parvati, and Fay were busy scratching their quills on a large number of diagrams and astrological signs which looked vaguely like things Trelawney had shown them in her lair-class.

“Sorry,” the Boy-Who-Lived closed his eyes for two seconds, but when he reopened them, the images of girls giggling around Divination charts failed to disappear. “But you will understand, I’m sure, why I think it’s a joke.”

“Oh absolutely,” the two red-haired menaces answered in a same voice. “And they failed predicting our third preliminary would take place in the Quidditch stadium and would be a runic animated obstacle course with a lot of water and powerful jets.”

“I think the moral of the story is to not believe in Divination, no?” said Kenneth Towler while letting himself fall onto the large couch closer to them.

“Absolutely,” Fred and George chorused like they had repeating it for hours, in what was one of their twins’ peculiarities.

“It could give you an advantage!” exclaimed Parvati, interrupting her calculations for a second.

Kenneth guffawed.

“I’m sorry,” the fifth-year drawled lazily, “but have you watched the same preliminaries I did? Because last time I checked, there was a certain Ravenclaw leaving us in the dust winning preliminary after preliminary, and Diggory finishing a distant second.”

“Quite right,” approved Fred.

“Ah, Saint Evidence-Towler, what would we do without you?” added George.

“One less lab rat to test your farting cushions?” the brown-haired boy proposed.

The two Weasleys looked at each other and smiled with a grin which gave Neville nothing but a sense of impending doom.

Fortunately, this likely interlude of brainstorming-pranking was interrupted by Angelina and Alicia, each of the Chasers hexing one of the Twins in the backside and forcing them to abandon their seats.

“Let the other girls believe what they want,” the older witch said derisively. “It isn’t like they will play a role more important than spectators next year.”

“I heard that!” Lavender shouted. Angelina just rolled her eyes.

 “You should still be careful, Angelina,” Kenneth advised. “I think that if the third preliminary proved something, it’s that the rankings can be upturned at any moment.”

Katie, who had just arrived on these words, stuck her tongue at the only non-player who was in the discussion near the southern window.

“You’re just jealous girls are doing better than boys, Kenneth.”

The recipient of the teasing instantly opened his mouth to protest.

“Excuse me? Last time I saw the boards, we had two girls and two boys leading the House Preliminary Rankings. Girls have Potter and you, and there is Cedric Diggory for the Badgers and-“

“Warrington doesn’t count,” Alicia interjected. “The Slytherins aren’t part of the contest; they just invited one girl, and I don’t think Tracey has received the permission to win, if you understand what I mean. But who cares about the Snakes anyway? We have the Trial of Air to prepare!”

“Are you sure?” The Boy-Who-Lived wasn’t just asking for the sake of it; there was a high degree of uncertainty over the whole thing. “Flitwick was obviously the mind behind the Water Preliminaries. Professor Sprout organised the Temple of Plants, a trial of Earth. But honestly, I don’t see really how the Preliminary-which-mustn’t-be-mentioned was a ‘Fire Preliminary’...”

“Neville has a point,” Kenneth immediately agreed. “Except the flames under our cauldrons, and some involuntary explosions, I didn’t see much fire.”

“The Red Boxes were the colour of fire,” George tried.

“Idiot,” Angelina answered, sending him another hex as she took Fred’s seat. “Since we are in the Quidditch stadium last time, should it be an ‘Air Preliminary’?”

“No, and you’re right,” Neville recognised. “Better to focus on the classes which have been at the heart of each Preliminary. Herbology, Potions, Charms, DADA and Runes have been done. What does it leave us?”

“Magical Creatures and Transfiguration,” Kenneth whispered. “Oh dear, please tell me we aren’t going to face what Hagrid loves hiding in the Forbidden Forest!”

“We aren’t going to face what Hagrid loves hiding in the Forbidden Forest!” Fred repeated before smirking evilly. “Obviously, the preliminary contest won’t be there so the nice beasties won’t be-“

The third hex of Angelina silenced him, and Alicia cursed George to endure the same fate three seconds later.

**17 April 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Venetia**

“I am going to kill her, you know.”

This was a lie, of course, and they both knew it. But since all his attempts to open a conversation with Eleonora de Riva had failed, this was the only approach Lorenzo had not tried.

It worked...somewhat.

“No, you won’t,” said absently the slim brunette of the de Riva family. “Lucrezia is stronger than you and far more talented in Duelling. And assuming you somehow managed to cheat and end her life in the middle of a Preliminary before thousands of spectators, there’s her mother to consider. Kill one, and the second will ensure you won’t be here to watch another sunrise.”

Lorenzo wanted to tell his fellow Champion she was mistaken, but alas this was all likely what would happen. There was a reason, after all, why the biggest clan of Succubae had been growing and expanding its influence over the Mediterranean in the last centuries, and it wasn’t because the Light had been lax in their elimination procedures.

“Granted, but this is an obstacle course and a multi-duel preliminary in one,” Lorenzo tried again, “I agree eliminating her when her mother is watching would be stupid, but we could see which tactics and spells are useful against the Champion of Venus.”

For a reason neither himself nor any of his mentors had any clue about, many Dark Aspects which had not been in the game for centuries or millennia were returning in this era. Lucrezia Sforza, like the whore she was, had embraced Venus and the Evil of Desire. There was an evil blade of the Morrigan in Britain, and all signs pointed out that the Dark Queen had made a pact with Loki for the monstrous Power of Chaos. Fortunately, Malatasti was a more predictable follower of Ares, otherwise Lorenzo would have wondered what was wrong with Fate.

“No.” This time Eleonora didn’t even look at him, instead choosing to study in detail the marble statue of Bacchus the organising staff had decided to emplace in their waiting room.

Lorenzo was sure it was one of the little jokes the servants of Evil had congratulated themselves on for several hours among themselves. From a non-initiated eye, everything was more than fine in this part of the gigantic Coliseum the Venetians had sponsored to host the future European Magical Tournament. There were several small marble and bronze statues, many paintings, a soft and noble carpet, a few international newspapers for some light reading, and other luxurious decorations. It was an atmosphere worthy of scions of the Great Families.

From an initiated perspective, however, you couldn’t miss the little insults here and there. The carpet, while not extremely ancient, was purple and gold, and definitely of the Byzantine style; an unmistakeable message the Exchequer had never forgotten the treachery of the Fourth Crusade which had led to the sack of the Queen of Cities. The marble and bronze statues represented Bacchus, yes, Greek God of Games, Wine, Festivities, Theatre...and Ritual Madness. Some people might not know what Bacchus and the Greek Dionysus stood for, but Lorenzo wasn’t so blind. Bacchus was an Aspect of Corruption, and not one the Light had few reasons to complain about.

“Let me guess. You are going to tell me because you were childhood friends, all will be fine,” the Champion of Athena spoke sarcastically.

“Everything is definitely not fine!” It was good they were utterly forbidden to use their wands in the waiting rooms before they were called, because light danced on the fingers of Eleonora, and even a few feet away, the power was making his skin shiver. And her black eyes were filled with disgust. “Do you think that maybe, just maybe, the Exchequer wouldn’t find it so easy to recruit the Champions of Darkness if you weren’t trying to assassinate them before they’re out of the cradle? Our friendship never really recovered from your little band of assassins’ killing spree five years ago. Yes, Lucrezia accepted I had nothing to do with it, but she was never the same again.”

“She’s a Succubus,” Lorenzo reminded her. “They are very Dark Creatures, and they always fall into the clutches of Evil in the end.”

“And you’re a human,” the retort was filled with a venom he had rarely heard the Champion of Innocence use. “The older I get, the more I realise the Light has used our numbers as an excuse for genocide and monstrous acts on an unprecedented scale.”

An instrument of music played inside the walls, warning them the time of preparation would end in five minutes. Neither of the two Champions gave it much thought at this moment.

“So what’s your solution, then?” The Medici Heir tried to not sound threatening or ironic this time, given the temper of the Chosen of Vesta, Innocence’s Aspect. “The Dark is almost ready to strike. Whatever they want to unleash, they have the Champions of Darkness to do so. Lucrezia is one of them. Malatesti and Arali are at best neutral, at worst powerful allies of them. It’s only a matter of days before Poliakov joins them, I think. And they have contacted the last two Dark Witches of Northern Europe.”

“I would try negotiation,” the brunette witch said, inspecting her nails. “The Exchequer has waited for a long time to strike, as you’ve said. This means they are patient. Concessions now would likely buy us several more years of peace that we could use to good effect and convince several Lady-level witches to side with us.”

“The high authorities of the Trinity don’t share your opinion.”

“Of course not,” the other Light Champion scoffed. “That would require for them to think by themselves. For the moment, they’re all kneeling and applauding like good little servants now that there is something ‘older and wiser’ to tell them what to do. And we’re all united in unity; Army of Light, Trinity, and Order of the Phoenix, isn’t it fantastic?”

Lorenzo winced at the emotions carried by her voice. A good thing Urmah Temen wasn’t here today. The much older Champion of Marduk would not have received these words calmly. And honestly, Lorenzo, both as Champion of Athena and Guardian of Unity, was not pleased by them either.

“It is not the will of the Light to entertain peace talks at this time,” he declared in a much calmer tone than he wanted to use. “Condé and yourself have given your opinion with your supporters; you were overruled. There can’t be any accord with the Dark, and there won’t be any. The moment they think they have the strength to get rid of us, they will strike, and their monsters and armies of Evil will usher a new Age of Darkness. I really can’t understand why you are so...reluctant. Soon we will have a new Champion of Fate, likely on Beltane. We will be seven, and this time victory, true victory, will be won against the Old Horror.”

“I gave you my opinion and you disregarded it,” Eleonora turned her eyes away as music thunder over their heads, calling them to leave the room and climb up to participate in the preliminary. “I just want you to know that you and your friends murdered peace. Don’t return complaining or begging when the hostilities will turn sour for your band of assassins.”

**18 April 1994, Ministry of Magic, London**

“I want these vampires found, and once you do, I want them dead!”

Rufus Scrimgeour was usually proud of his long and distinguished career in the service of the Ministry of Magic. For decades as an Auror, he had fought Dark Wizards, investigated felonies and crimes, confiscated hundreds of forbidden heirlooms and enchanted objects, and rank by rank climbed his way to the top of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. All his hair had turned grey, he now had a bad leg, the Healers of Saint Mungo’s had prescribed him a severe regime of Potions and physical exercise to make sure he didn’t end up paralysed or completely senile before the next decade was over, and there were persistent whispers the ‘upstanding citizens who had the misfortune to be Imperiused’ had placed a large bounty on his head. But he was the Director of the DMLE, and for all the circumstances which had forced Amelia to be dismissed from the position, he was proud to lead the Aurors and Hit-Wizards of Britain.

But when he heard Cornelius Fudge rant and proclaim such stupidities, he was honestly wondering why the standards of the Auror Corps were so high when it was blatantly obvious the post of Minister could be seized by the first moron.

“This is the third isolated village where the Obliviators were forced to intervene and remove all evidence! Something must be done!”

The DMLE Director almost opened his mouth to ask if a victory against the Shadow Blades would be enough to bury the lawyer’s conflict which had recently manifested between Narcissa Malfoy and the trio Dumbledore-Black-Fudge, before deciding that being thrown out of his post like Amelia was would neither help the DMLE nor the Ministry’s efficiency.

“I share your displeasure, Minister,” he was as a result forced to answer. “Unfortunately, the vampires we are searching for are difficult to locate with the limited effectives I have. Due to your directives, the Ministry takes the utmost priority. Then we have Azkaban, Diagon Alley, the Quidditch stadium of this summer’s World Cup, and the last school preliminary taking place at Hogwarts on the 1st of May to patrol and protect against all potential enemies. I have barely five or six Aurors and two or three Hit-Wizards free to investigate at the best of times once the men and women to fulfil all these duties have been assigned. And at the risk of stating the obvious, Minister, the British Isles are a very big place to search, especially when our targets aren’t using traceable wands.”

Rookies often believed the Aurors and the Ministry could find someone with simple Point-me spells, but it was pure nonsense. Most of the tracking and locating Charms, if you weren’t a Lord-level wizard, were very limited in range. No, the Ministry was forced to rely on the magical grid and the nation-wide Trace network, and it was hardly perfect in the first place. Transportation methods like Apparition often left weak signatures depending where you travelled since a lot of people didn’t use their wands, but there were thousands across the Isles.

“If I had a better idea about their goals or the reasons why they returned after months in Transylvania Minister, I would have a high confidence I would be able to tell where they are going to go next. But there is no clue, and the few blood-drained bodies we are able to find all indicate their projected course is haphazard and follows no logic any of my Aurors have been able to find.”

“They aren’t moving in Hogwarts’ direction, are they?”

“No Minister, so far their ravages rather lead their coven to Wales or a region near it.”

Cornelius Fudge stayed silent for a moment, before his visage considerably brightened. Rufus wasn’t really reassured. It looked like the Minister had one of his ‘bright’ ideas...again.

“Could we not hire vampire-killers from the continent?”

Sometimes, it really didn’t pay to get up early in the morning, that was the most polite way to describe the lassitude which engulfed him.

“Minister, independent vampire-hunters are mercenaries in soul and body. Not only do they not answer to us, they aren’t obeying the edicts of the ICW either. There’s also the minor fact they’re terribly expensive, and they will ask to be paid for their services whether they are successful or not. Moreover, many have dubious affiliations, and we’re speaking about links with terrorist organisations and major crimes minimum. I can’t in good conscience authorise hiring them, not when the level of funding of the Department is held hostage by the Wizengamot.”

“Assuming I agree with you on this...” this was not the first time Fudge sounded like a petulant child, in Rufus’ opinion, but it was one of the worst episodes in a while. “What other solutions do you have?”

**19 April 1994, Somewhere in Indonesia**

The Knight Priest was cleaning his hands from the blood of the latest ‘volunteer’ who had helped him in his rituals when Knight Recruiter and Knight Summoner passed his inner wards.

“Congratulations upon your daughter’s victory in her first preliminary, Headmistress,” the Dark Wizard told the Succubus as he conjured another of his white long robes and put it back on his cleaned working clothes.

“Thank you, Knight Priest,” Angelina Sforza smiled in a very carnivorous manner. “Seeing her give a lesson on battle-spells to this Champion of Athena, in my opinion, was more than worth the investment of building the Coliseum for the Tournament.”

“I doubt Knight Treasurer will agree with you on this point,” Knight Summoner said quietly behind her.

The three senior members of the Exchequer chuckled for a few seconds before the conversation turned to far less pleasant subjects.

“Not that I find your presence unpleasant, Ladies, but can I know the reason for your presence here? If it’s about the insolent child of Durmstrang, my collaboration with Knight Executor has yet to yield profitable results.”

That they would succeed was not in doubt, but it was going to take time, and they had to do it right: with Champions of Loki, you rarely had the opportunity for second chances.

The Exchequer, as a general rule, rarely took acts perpetrated against their organisation personally. They were an alliance of darkness and ambition, and the nature of the people who were their ‘clients’ meant megalomaniac and selfish behaviours were the rule, not the exception.

But Lyudmila Romanov had sent them back one of their Pawns dead and transformed into an Inferi, and to add insult to the injury, the arrogant child had the gall to infect it with a particularly virulent plague.

It had taken several hours to properly sterilise Lab 5, and he had to restrain Knight Herald personally to prevent him from rushing to Durmstrang and laying waste to it. It had *not* been an experience he particularly enjoyed.

The Champion of Chaos was going to die, and whichever Knight the King designated to end her was sure not going to make it quick.

“No, this isn’t about Loki’s Dark-Lady-in-being. We have a plan to control the ascension of the Champion of Fate while neutralising the minor possibility ‘Voldemort’ will ever return. And most of the tools are already perfectly emplaced and ready to be triggered on Beltane.”

“Oh?” Knight Priest wasn’t often surprised, but he freely admitted this declaration had titillated his curiosity. Two types of people he really, really loved to kill were in the same sentence: the ‘providential child’ and the ‘stupid Dark Lord’. And the irony of doing it on the Sabbat day where the Light was supposed to rise ascendant would also bring him a large amount of satisfaction. “You have my full attention.”

**Author’s note**: Next chapter will be the Beltane preliminary and the identity of the four Champions will be confirmed. The rankings and a few surprises will also be included in it. And yes, before you ask, the Beltane events will be divided in two chapters. It would be a Weaver Option-like wall of text otherwise...

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