**Chapter 79**

**Summer Festivities**

**1 July 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

Animagus transformation wasn’t supposed to be addictive. Alexandra had read many books, and none mentioned human-to-animal transformation as something particularly pleasant at the beginning. You may open your magical core to the shift into your inner animal, but there were a lot of things which made the prospect something not to be enjoyed. Nocturnal birds like owls, for example, had excellent night vision but when it was daylight, human eyes were far superior, giving a potential Animagus owl the feeling of blindness when the sun was shining.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Animagus Champions of the Old Powers rarely bothered with the duty of writing their self-transfiguration experiences into books or rolls of parchments.

And for them, it was like a drug – or at least the effects she felt were similar to those described by a certain gang of miscreants before the Potter Heiress went to them and forbid them recreational usage of forbidden substances.

As long as she was a Lernaean Hydra, Alexandra felt all-powerful, invincible even. The magic flooded every part of her being, increasing emotions like euphoria and a sense of invincibility. And the moment she returned to her human body, there was a shadow of weakness and fragility.

The Champion of the Morrigan didn’t need someone else to know these feelings were incredibly dangerous. The old legends of wizards and witches abandoning their mortal shells, far from being the ‘ridiculous tales’ they were considered to be by the Ministry officials, were a powerful warning now.

But the most evident reason it was so dangerous was that Alexandra was neither immortal nor invincible. The Dark Queen of Durmstrang was an Animagus who had the fangs and the natural assets to kill her any day of the week. That was for the claims of invincibility. As for immortality, the Lernaean Hydra was only unnaturally long-lived. It was assuredly far longer than any age a non-magical human could hope to reach, but the Greek Ministry had opened a museum where they presented to the magical tourists skeletons of different species of Hydras.

Unless Alexandra was so delusional to believe she was the exception and not the rule, immortality was definitely not in her bones.

Last but not least, the black-haired witch had not mastered her self-transfiguration. As proven by her need to remove her clothes before she transformed into her inner animal, otherwise there would be only tatters on her skin by the time she abandoned her reptilian looks.

“You will have to solve it for the Tournament,” Morag commented as she put on her clothes quickly. Morag and Lyre had already seen her naked before, but it didn’t mean she had become an exhibitionist, thank you very much. “Somehow, I don’t think you want tens of thousands of spectators to see you in that state.”

“No offense,” Alexandra replied to her friend, “but for the moment, I’m training to *avoid* being forced to show my Animagus form to half of Europe.”

Her blue T-Shirt was back on, and Alexandra stretched, verifying that every Hydra part had been successfully transfigured back. It had not happened in several days, but it was best to not grow too comfortable with what was after all a high-level transfiguration procedure.

“The moment I’m forced to change in public and unable to silence any witnesses,” the Ravenclaw witch continued, “is the moment several parties will try to find a way to overcome the protections of the Hydra. And given that certain organisations have archives likely older than Hogwarts itself, I am not exactly eager to give them thousands of hours to do their research.”

“Information is power,” Lyre de Male-Foi approved. “However...this Tournament promises to be very dangerous. And if the other Champions don’t feel reluctant about using their own Animagi forms to battle...”

“Yes, it could be a huge mess,” Alexandra recognised. “If I have no other solution, I will transform into a Hydra, of course. Potential flaws being exploited by Light and Dark enemies in the long-term will not mean anything if I die in a Tournament trial.”

“Well, this will give you a surprise factor for several minutes, at least,” the French Heiress shrugged. “Your Hydra form is very impressive.”

“Thank you,” Alexandra answered and she was sincere. “And since we’re speaking of Animagi, did you manage to discover if some of the other Champions are training to unleash their own inner animals?”

“No,” Lyre admitted regretfully. “Be it Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, or the Scuola Regina, no one has decided to reveal his or her Animagus skills in the middle of the preliminaries. Well, Delacour showed off with her Veela lineage, but we already knew she was one.” The blonde-haired witch grimaced. “It’s a good thing you learned Occlumency, Alex. Because while I doubt their fireballs will manage to give you more than a minor inconvenience, never mind their beaks and claws, their allure can be quite redoubtable if the target feels attraction towards women.”

“I don’t think it will be as useful as you think for Delacour,” Alexandra raised an eyebrow. “I’m continuing to learn Occlumency of course – may I insist how ‘clear your thoughts’ is something headache-inducing? – but I met her in the Exchequer’s base, and though I’m rather sure she was using some allure, it didn’t stop me from thinking that bigoted witch would look far better with her head separated from the rest of her body.”

And so far, more than six months later, Alexandra had not discovered a single clue telling her this judgement was in error. If the two of them had to fight in the first trials, Alexandra was confident it was going to be to the death.

“Fair enough,” Morag approved, “obviously, the fact we don’t anything about who is an Animagus and who isn’t incites prudence. And I think we have to be careful where the Hogwarts Champions are concerned too.”

“Prudent, yes. Jumping at shadows, no,” Alexandra said as Atalanta decided to use her right shoulder as her perch again. Since she had no protective cloth here and the Potter Heiress didn’t fancy transforming part of her upper body so close after the last ‘demonstration’, the green-eyed teenager took her avian companion into her arms and caressed her white feathers...which might be exactly what the clever messenger bird had intended. “Hooper, Diggory, and Warrington didn’t smell like animals a single day of last year, they didn’t show a single sign of being interested in Animagus studies, and the tell-tale signs of being in the process of completing their transformations were utterly absent.”

It was not a guarantee they hadn’t been able to evade all attention from the Hogwarts population, but people who became Animagi tended to manifest certain quirks. Alexandra’s ‘insomnia’ and her love of fish and other sea food were maybe a bit more personality-changing than most due to her being also a Champion, but ‘normal’ Animagi were far from untouched by them.

“Since we’re speaking about it, I can tell you several students are interested in following into your steps now that the rumour is around that you have mastered the transformation.”

“As I have said before, I will have mastered it when I can turn into a Hydra and back without shredding my clothes,” Alexandra told her red-haired friend peevishly. “And if it’s Fred and George again, you know Flitwick and the rest of the Professors would flay me if they became aware I taught the Twin Terrors *that*.”

There were things that would make anyone pale, but the master-pranksters of Gryffindor Tower gaining the additional skill of an animal transformation was not to be taken lightly. Emotional mood swings aside, utter chaos would likely follow inside the corridors of the school in short order.

“Having more Animagi in our group could be a powerful asset,” Morag spoke while her hand progressively turned into a paw and her eyes gained feline irises. “And it’s not only our two pranksters who are eager to learn. Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis have shown an interest too.”

Alexandra grimaced as Lyre’s eyes also took a feline appearance and white fur grew on her forearms.

“I’m not exactly enthusiastic about managing so many people, Morag, Lyre. I’m already helping both of you, and it’s a project which is going to take most of the summer. Since there is only one of me, I can’t exactly be everywhere, not with my own training for the Tournament. And once we’re back at Hogwarts, we will be either under Dumbledore’s nose or travelling to Italy with all the law-breaking consequences over our heads.”

Giving the teachers ten thousand reasons to hate her aside, her schedule was full, and the ‘eager students’ were not part of Ravenclaw House, which massively increased their chances of being discovered.

“You are not curious about what inner animals they have?”

“I am,” Alexandra smiled, “but Flitwick will know I am responsible of this monumental magical earthquake, and I have enough problems to not add this one to my conscience...”

**5 July 1994, Gringotts Bank, London, England**

Something like ten years after his grand duel against Grindelwald in the streets of Berlin, Albus Dumbledore had explained before the Wizengamot that it was the righteousness of his cause which had led him and the allied forces to victory.

Somehow, Alexandra found it hard to believe anyone had believed that.

Oh, Grindelwald had been the very definition of evil during his campaign against the different European nations. There was plenty of devastation and countless massacres which had been put on the heads of non-magical regiments of Nazi Germany and other belligerents when in reality the culprits were ruthless wizards.

But the tide had only begun to turn in 1941 and 1942, when about two-thirds of the ICW nations realised that if they didn’t unite and fight back together, Grindelwald wasn’t just going to conquer Europe, but also the world within twenty years.

And so the ICW and plenty of independent magical nations had poured gold, supplies, elite mercenaries, and recently trained military forces into Europe to defeat the Dark Lord.

It was the gold and the stupendous amount of resources involved which had pushed back Grindelwald until the conflict was fought in German lands, Dresden and many other cities burned in Fiendfyre and other monstrous spells, and Dumbledore decided finally that if he didn’t move, Britain would be utterly ignored on the world stage for the next two decades after their excellent attempt to imitate ostriches.

The ICW and other allied factions – which certainly included the Exchequer – hadn’t won because they were good; they had defeated their enemy because they had spent more Galleons and other gold coins, and their military investment had been cleverer than Grindelwald’s butchers. It appeared that the Nazi industrial inefficiency was not the only example of an evil administration screwing up by the numbers. Dark Wizards – not including the Exchequer - also were lamentable civilian organisers and rulers.

As a result, the lesson to take of this past conflict was that without money, the chances of winning any war were ridiculously low, and leaving the gold inactive inside your vaults didn’t do you any good when the Dark Lord was at the gates. Of course, investing everything in the military was stupid too; without civilian investments, you arrived at the same extremities her deceased father sunk the family’s fortune to over fourteen years ago.

Thus she was in Grimjaw’s office today, instead of going to a Quidditch stadium or taking a nap and swimming in a pool.

“This is a very diversified portfolio, Heiress Potter,” the old goblin commented.

“It is necessary,” she replied quietly, “given how ignorant I am of what is going to happen during and after the European Magical Tournament.”

That a war was going to explode in everyone’s faces went without saying, but since the Army of Light and the Exchequer didn’t appear to control outright any European government, the Basilisk-Slayer was in the dark on how and where the war was going to be fought.

“But since Heir Black was kind enough to give me one hundred thousand Galleons for free, yes I want you to invest half of this sum into the three main companies of naval transport of Amsterdam. Twenty-five thousand more Galleons will be invested in the clothing industry of Paris sponsored by neutral interests, and the last twenty-five thousand Galleons I am using for support of a French Alchemist.”

One both Lady Zabini and several other parties had confirmed was completely neutral and unaffiliated with any of the major power-blocks. Alexandra, like every customer, had to sign an agreement she had to defend his labs if they came under attack, but this favour was more than compensated by the resources it would give her to build a ward stone for her new Manor. And maybe, just maybe, it would open a door for Cho as his apprentice in some years. Though for this project, ‘wait and see’ seemed to be the adequate proverb.

“I will immediately send the orders after this meeting,” Grimjaw promised. “I notice you aren’t paying for the refurbishing of the Dreadnoughts and your other military assets with the content of Vault 7043.”

“No.” For the moment, the Parisian vault was exclusively allocated to her legal business abilities. With the seven hundred and fifty thousand Galleons part of Dumbledore’s fine stocked here, gold was not going to run out, and it offered a legitimate platform to handle every shop she owned or had an interest in. “The one hundred thousand Galleons we agreed upon will come from Vault X-48 of the Bardi Bank.”

Accordingly, it would respect the rule she had imposed herself: never buy more war stuff than what she invested in her civilian life.

“While I will not use your services in this affair, I can confirm to you I am going to invest in several dragon preserves,” for the moment Fingolfin was her only Britannian Gold, but the preservation of the different species was one of her high priorities...and those who treated the dragons like Lady Zabini did in general generate immense profits from it. And honestly, it was two hundred thousand Galleons coming from Dumbledore. Better to use it for a noble purpose when the ex-Chief Warlock didn’t. The money spent was going to be used both on the Venetian reserves and in England, which would hopefully make sure the odds of losing gold was minimal.

“You seem to have the situation in hand for the months to come,” her interlocutor nodded. “Is there anything more you want to assign funds to today?”

“Assign funds, maybe not, but I want you to look at a possible site for an eventual land purchase,” Alexandra said as she unrolled a parchment and handed it to her bank account manager.

“I have learned while studying the history of my family that House Potter once married into House Peverell, and this Most Ancient and Most Noble House had important land assets everywhere on the British Isles. Now, part of the dowry a daughter of that House brought was the land my ancestors used to build their ancestral manor in Wales, but according to the old tomes, they had several properties and castles in Scotland and Ireland.”

“House Peverell has been extinct for centuries, as I’m sure you are aware,” the goblin grunted. “I suppose you are interested in seeing if some of their warded lands were kept outside the non-magical world?”

“Yes.” As long as no one lived nearby, it would not be that difficult to reactivate some or build a new entirely ward scheme. As a fourth-year, the black-haired witch was only beginning in Ancient Runes, but all she needed was some help, and in a few years, this new Potter residence would be extremely difficult to locate, never mind invade. Alexandra had learned from her friends’ incomplete plans and her personal fruitless schemes to make Hogwarts defensible. The new ‘Potter Manor’ – although she was pretty much certain she wasn’t going to give it a name with ‘Potter’ or build a manor at all – would be prepared to repel armies from the start. Security first, comfort later, this was the order of her priorities. “Do you think you can have a list ready for the end of July?”

“I can certainly try,” Grimjaw chuckled, “for a certain fee.”

Typical answer for a goblin, really. Fortunately, Alexandra had not expected any other outcome.

**11 July 1994, Quidditch World Cup area, Dartmoor, England**

There was a lot of magic Alexandra had been introduced to in the last years, but few skills she had completely mastered. It was a point of pride to her that Apparition was on this short list.

Therefore the green-eyed girl tried not to laugh hard when Blaise Zabini stumbled in front of her before finding himself lying down in the moss and the grass of the woods where they had apparated to.

“How did you manage to convince the Venetian examiners that you had the skill level to earn an Apparition temporary license?”

Unlike England, who decided that most children had no business learning how to Apparate before they approached their seventeenth birthday – Alexandra had only been considered because after killing two Basilisks, no one was concerned about little details like unlicensed teleportation - most of the nations of the European continent held very different views about what their children could and couldn’t do. And as always, gold mattered. Provided you knew the right people and for a price above the purse of most middle-class people, it was possible to learn and be authorised to Apparate well before reaching one’s fifteenth birthday in several countries.

Something, Alexandra mused as she helped the dark-skinned Slytherin to stand up, which was not an entirely good idea. As unreasonable and prone to trample everyone’s liberties as the Ministry was, there was no denying Blaise was far from a master in the domain of Apparition. To be sure, he never arrived in several parts, but his entries were far from graceful.

“Mother knows the right people,” the son of her magical guardian answered as if echoing her thoughts, “and the three boys who tried to pass the exam before me were incredibly bad at Apparating more than a few metres away.”

“They were splinching a lot, weren’t they?”

The separation of random body parts was one of the more ‘disturbing’ problems which could happen with Apparition, though Alexandra had never experienced it personally. According to Stella Zabini and a few Apparition instructors, it was what happened when the mind was insufficiently determined.

“Yes, they did,” Blaise tried not to sound too disappointed as they showed their licenses to the grumpy Ministry officials waiting at the edge of the woods, and after a few seconds they were allowed to proceed towards the tents and other methods of camping the wizards and witches coming to watch the Quidditch games had built.

“Wow...”

The Champion of Ravenclaw knew most of the tickets had been sold for the games opposing favourites of the public, but knowing one hundred thousand spectators were awaited was one thing, and seeing them all concentrated in a single location was quite another.

The Ministry decrees of ‘presenting yourselves as Muggles’ and ‘enforcing the Statute of Secrecy’ couldn’t change the fact that the extensive mass of tents in front of her was filled with improbable and magical things. The atmosphere was shrouded in magic. Flyers on their broomsticks flew by hovering just over the heads of the wizards and witches walking in the sinuous ‘alleys’.

“Wow indeed,” Blaise agreed, “Did you see-“

“Alex!” Like summoned by the Slytherin’s words, Morag materialised before them, and before the Potter Heiress could say her greetings, she found herself with a very large green hat upon her head, her T-Shirt went from red to green, and there were decorations of clovers everywhere on her. A look to her right was enough to understand Blaise had received a similar treatment, with the added ‘boon’ that his hair and his hands were green too.

“Hey we can’t-“

“Come on! One can’t think you support Argentina!”

“Yes,” the Heir of House Zabini spoke sardonically, “that would be a real shame...”

But as Morag and several of the Irish supporters around them were making a ruckus loud enough to wake up the dead, Alexandra was rather sure his last words had gone unnoticed.

It was only when they entered a large tent – green with more clovers than Alexandra had seen this year, it went without saying – that something like a normal conversation could resume, though the songs, the acclamations, the pre-game celebrations and everything ensured silence had been banished from this part of England.

“Welcome to the Quidditch World Cup!” the Irish Heiress exclaimed, rising a baton of green and gold. “We are going to save the honour of the British Isles’ Quidditch National teams today!”

“Wales has yet to play,” Alexandra found good to mention.

“They have yet to be eliminated and humiliated, you mean,” Morag countered before throwing them more accessories to be ‘the perfect Irish Quidditch supporter-fanatic’. “England proved it was possible to play more badly than the Chudley Cannons by losing 390-10 against Transylvania, and I think the vampires sent their reserve team into the fray once they had scored fifteen goals. Scotland managed to lose against Luxembourg despite their opponents losing their titular Beaters in the first hour! Luxembourg! Seriously, we could have put the Slytherin Quidditch team on the pitch, and they would have done far better!”

“Hey!” the only Slytherin present protested.

“Neither Venice nor Italy have managed to qualify themselves for the finals, so you don’t have any reason to speak, Zabini!” the MacDougal Heiress said sharply before dragging them out of the tent and introducing them to what Alexandra felt was the entire magical community of Irish supporters.

Not that there were only Irish among them, evidently. As the red-haired Ravenclaw had said, the defeat of the English national team had been sufficiently humiliating for plenty of wizards and witches to transfigure their banners from roses to clovers, and from red and white to plain green. Moreover, House MacDougal, as its name implied, had been a Scottish House hundreds of years ago, before certain violent feuds had convinced them to build themselves new domains on the other side of the Irish Sea. Relations with some distant cousins were much more cordial than they had been in the day, though, and now that the Isles’ problems were different, there was little to no enmity when they gathered to watch Quidditch games.

As long as it wasn’t Ireland versus Scotland playing against each other, but it seems that this year, the chances of it happening were exactly zero.

Still, there were other supporters draped in green. What looked like an entire coven from the Moroccan tribes had settled for several weeks on the soil of Dartmoor, and the Irish appeared to have converted them to the ‘green fever’. There were American wizards and witches, many who could boast about having Irish blood in their veins – no team of North America had managed to earn a spot among the sixteen best teams, and they had rallied to their old allegiances.

All in all, there had to be over three to four thousand people supporting Erin Moran’s team.

And the very respectable assembly of Irish supporters was just one of the many miniature tent-cities where crowds of wizards and witches celebrated, danced, and did whatever people did before going to watch a sportive event.

It was...extremely enlightening. Alexandra had known Britain was not the beginning or the end of magical civilisation. The Potter Heiress had travelled on the continent, and her guardian had dragged her into every clothes shop of the Parisian magical community several times.

But when you saw Indian wizards speaking Parseltongue in public as they carried snakes around their arms and their necks, the cultural differences were impossible to forget. Many African and American mages were using sceptres or similar magical foci. Asian mages seemed to have found methods to include pieces of certain metals on their gloves to cast their spells. Many magics felt and smelled different. Many colours and garbs she had never seen anywhere. It was absolutely fascinating, and assuming the future allowed it, Alexandra promised herself she would go to see at least a game of the next Quidditch Cup, if only to discover how many different magics existed in the world. Honestly, unless she imagined things, there were wizards of Babylonian culture conversing with *djinns* while immense altars of gold prepared strange potions under the sun.

Alexandra wished she could have spoken with plenty of these foreign magical practitioners, but not being invited to, it would be the height of rudeness. And besides, it wasn’t like nobody wanted to speak with her. Once her name was spread around, there was a circle of Irish and non-Irish wizards and witches prompt to ask her a litany of questions. Apparently, killing two Basilisks, surviving assassinations and battles, and being in the thick of many magical scandals was the kind of tale which was beginning to make most people pause, and the musicians sing interesting songs about it.

“Is it true the monster of Salazar Slytherin was three hundred feet-long?”

“Did you really challenge two hundred Dark Wizards and defeat them in the middle of Hogsmeade?”

“They’re saying you will be named Headmistress of Hogwarts when you graduate!”

Unfortunately, a lot of rumours ranged from the improbable to the completely ridiculous...as usual. The Basilisk-Slayer was trying to convince a young witch half of her age that no, Hogwarts wouldn’t be her seat of power when she graduated from the school – with a distinct lack of success, she might add – when Morag reappeared again.

“Sorry to stop the autograph session, but the game is about to begin in an hour! We must go to our seats!”

And her red-haired friend dragged her once again through the crowds and the labyrinth of tents, only pausing to ‘recover’ Zabini, who had found himself in a very compromising position with witches looking far, far older than him and speaking Portuguese.

“Following in your mothers’ footsteps?” asked a MacDougal cousin who had seen everything and by the look in his eyes, the red-haired boy perfectly understood the importance of such a judicious piece of blackmail.

“At least for the multiple-relationships part,” Alexandra nodded semi-seriously, making the dark-skinned boy swear something unintelligible under his breath.

“And here comes the Great Stadium of the Quidditch World Cup!” Morag announced as they left the forest of tents.

The Ravenclaw Champion was going to admit that even discounting the tents and the myriad of facets of the international community, this monument to the Quidditch sport was worth the trip.

The Ministry of Magic had proclaimed it was large enough to welcome one hundred thousand spectators, and it seemed that for once, their propaganda wasn’t a pile of lies.

Like each time wizards built respecting the laws of the Statute, the stands and the rest of the infrastructure were nearly entirely buried under the earth. Several massive tunnels allowed the spectators to get inside, and the only true part of the stadium which was visible from the air was the central pitch, which was projecting an impressive amount of light, accompanied by sonorous old-fashioned music.

Once inside, it was truly incredible and the view got better as they climbed the stairs to reach the lodge Morag’s parents had allowed them to use – with their support of most of the Irish Quidditch Team, Alexandra didn’t think the tickets had been really *paid*.

There was no calm or any pause in the festivities. Ads circulated in every section of the stadium, towed by some of the largest brooms in existence, and fireworks exploded at random intervals, sometimes spraying green or blue-white paint everywhere. An entire army of Leprechauns was dancing among the public, and it was raining gold over certain parts of the public. Yes, it was literally raining gold.

“It will disappear in several hours, so watch your purses and what you buy and sell after the game is over,” the MacDougal Heiress advised.

“Please,” Alexandra smiled, “even if the average Galleon had not a different weight and magical feeling than these coins, who would seriously believe it’s real money?” Her reflexes allowed her to catch a few ‘samples’ effortlessly as the cascade of gold passed nearby. “Seriously, a leprechaun is grimacing on this one, and there’s a ‘Support Ireland!’ on the other!”

“Yes, some people must have really sucked in the classes for Care of Magical Creatures...”

The disorder and the festivities at last paused when the lodge several metres above them exploded in light and the voice of Ludo Bagman – because it had to be him, of course, commenting the game – exploded into the stadium. Alexandra tried – without much success – to tone him down.

Then after a few minutes of boring speech, came the moment tens of thousands of wizards and witches came for.

“LET ME PRESENT TO YOU...THE IRISH NATIONAL QUIDDITCH TEAM! MULLET! TROY! MORAN! CONNOLLY! QUIGLEY! RYAN! ANNNNND LYNCH!”

Each player’s name was accompanied by a green flash out of the players’ access, and as the seven players of the Irish team flew at the speed of spells in front of delirious crowds, Alexandra knew the technical specificities of the Firebolt had not been exaggerated in the least.

The difference between her Nimbus 2000 and the world-class broom Erin Moran and the other players were flying upon was so large it was like an entire different level of performance altogether.

Not that the Argentines were slow or clumsy either. They weren’t on Firebolts, but their brooms left blue-white smoke on their passage, and their acceleration was ridiculously fast.

“LET THE GAME...BEGIN!”

The salutations of the players had been fast. Now as the Quaffle was thrown into the arena, neither of the two teams were playing around anymore. The full power and skill of professionals was unleashed, and it was so fast that the recording-players they had bought before Apparating were necessary to not miss...a lot of things.

“MULLET SCORES!” Bagman exclaimed after less than two minutes. “10-0 FOR IRELAND!”

“What the hell...”

The Irish team had been good last summer. But now, with a full year of training together, twelve months of mastering their new brooms, and the certainty of having a stadium fully acquired to their victory, the performance of their Chasers and Beaters was...awesome.

Mullet, Troy, and Moran didn’t even *need* to look at their partners; feints or no feints, the passes always flew true in the hands of their partners. The two Beaters, Connolly and Quigley, weren’t presenting the same image of unity and team spirit, but no Bludger was breaking through their defence.

“MORAN SCORES!”

“YEAH!”

“TROY SCORES!”

“MULLET SCORES AGAIN!”

It wasn’t that the Argentine team was bad. Their Beaters were quite vicious, their Chasers had a good teamwork. But the Irish Keeper, Barry Ryan, was stopping every attempt, it was like he had eight eyes and ten hands, and missed attempt after missed attempt, the gap was growing larger.

Especially as the Irish Chasers weren’t missing *anything*.

Slim hope, of the entire clover-themed players, they had a player who was not as exceptional as the others: their Seeker. Or maybe it was the Argentine Seeker was the best player of his team in terms of talent. Either way, Aidan Lynch was not flying that well, though against the performance of his teammates, anyone would likely look bad.

It didn’t matter. In one hour, Ireland scored seventeen goals, and Argentina scored only one. In the second hour, the disequilibrium was even worse: nineteen goals for Ireland, and one for Argentina.

It was a massacre. And fifteen minutes later, Lynch managed to catch the Snitch at the end of a long struggle with his Argentine counterpart, bringing the torment of the South American players to an end.

“IRELAND: 550! ARGENTINA: 40! IRELAND WINS AND IS QUALIFIED FOR THE QUARTER-FINALS!”

The stadium exploded in green and gold, thousands of fireworks soared into the sky, and the festivities began.

They would not end until dawn.

**17 July 1994, Oxford, England**

“The simplest way, of course, would be to convince several Champions of the Dark to not participate in this Tournament.”

Alexandra gave an unimpressed stare to the ex-Professor of DADA. The blonde-haired wizard, to his credit, made an apologetic impression a couple of seconds after uttering the words.

“I thought about it,” the Potter Heiress said after a moment of silence, “the problem is that even if I have suspicions, I only know the identity of one Dark Champion. And she’s not going to listen to me at the best of times.”

In fact, given how their last meeting had ended, the Dark Queen of Durmstrang was far more likely to challenge her to a rematch the moment they were in the presence of each other. Only the presence of dozens of Lord-level officials could –maybe – prevent the Champion of Chaos from transforming into her Fenrir Animagus form and go on a rampage.

“But assuming I could somehow contact one or two Dark Champions and convince them to renounce their obligations, I don’t think the fallout would be enjoyable. First, while we didn’t sign magical-compelling oaths, the fact is there are financial penalties for those who chicken out of these international-binding agreements. Second, anyone who removed his or her name from the competition is likely to be targeted as soon as humanly feasible by the Exchequer and the Army of Light. I’m rather confident the only reason I am not beating back wave after wave of assassins is because the latter know where I am going to be next year. As for the former, Morgana promised she would raze Hogwarts if I wasn’t among the Champions.”

“She might be bluffing,” Lockhart’s voice indicated he didn’t believe in his own tirade.

“My friends and I studied the layout of Hogwarts’ defences,” Alexandra replied neutrally. “Disregarding the fact that the wards are definitely not ready for an all-out magical war, the amount of land to defend is too vast and the number of defenders is too limited. There are less than forty permanent Professors living inside the school, and half of them are useless in a fight, by which I mean they wouldn’t last a minute against *me*.”

“Dumbledore would certainly call the Order of the Phoenix to the rescue.”

“Certainly,” the Basilisk-Slayer nodded, “he would also likely conscript the House Elves of the castle, McGonagall would animate the armours and the other statues as the Founders always intended, and likely the older students would take their wands and run to help.”

The green-eyed Champion shrugged.

“And then what? The Battle of Hogsmeade has proved rather evidently that no one save the esteemed Dumbledore, and perhaps myself, has the magical strength to fight a Knight of the Exchequer. Professor Flitwick is rather good, so I think that if he teams up with Professor McGonagall, Professor Sprout, and Professor Snape, they may be able to stalemate one more. All the while students who have had their DADA education sabotaged and are barely able to cast Stunners will be confronted by an endless tide of Inferi, assuming of course the Exchequer doesn’t have any surprises in their bag of tricks.”

And since every instance of being confronted with the actions of said organisation had resulted in seeing new ‘innovations’ in a magical field, Alexandra wasn’t going to bet a Knut on that.

“I am preparing evacuation protocols with some of my friends and the allies I feel I can trust,” the Ravenclaw Champion explained to the English-born spy. “If the Exchequer – or any hostile organisation – attacks the school, the main goal is for a maximum of people to get out of the trap, preferably by denying all the magical resources we can to the invaders in the process.”

Gilderoy Lockhart’s blue eyes studied her very seriously.

“You assume there is going to be trouble.”

“I have begun to read the Black Files,” the granddaughter of Dorea Potter nee Black spoke. “And what Lady Cassiopeia Black left to me contained plenty of evidence about what these Dark Lords and Dark Ladies are ready to do to be victorious.”

Assassins murdered popular Light politicians and influential wizards and witches in the middle of the night or in public. Stable governments were overthrown, and as the nation collapsed into a civil war, the agents of the King and the Queen advanced their pawns – no pun intended – and hired mercenaries on both sides to escalate the hostilities. Spies stole new incantations and rituals stored in Ministry vaults. Ambitious Dark Lords received military and political support as their campaigns of terror faltered.

Cassiopeia Black had given her a very, very extensive amount of horrifying evidence how bad the Exchequer was. Horace Slughorn’s benevolent attitude was not sufficient to allow her to forget the nightmare of Brise-Roc, but reading the Black Files had been a sobering moment. Light wasn’t Good, the fanatics who had regularly tried to end her were proof enough of that. And Alexandra supposed she wasn’t exactly a symbol of Good either, with how many people she had personally removed by magic and sword from this world.

But the Exchequer was Dark and they didn’t appear to have a lot of limits when they decided to pursue their objectives. Granted when the opposition broke the rules of balance and decided there wasn’t anything problematic with stabbing babies and pregnant mothers for the threats they could become, it wasn’t like they could march on the battlefield with silk gloves.

And yet.

And yet.

“I have done a lot of bloody things in the name of survival, but I do not support their pacts with Summons and other large-scale massacres.”

And at this moment, unless something completely broke all her beliefs, Alexandra wasn’t going to accept the Queen’s offer of Apprenticeship. Which would likely lead to violence between the Exchequer and herself.

Or more violence, there was Dumbledore and his allies to deal with too, once the Tournament was over.

“Do you have any idea what they intend to use this international competition for?” the UMAS-paid spy asked as she watched the structures of the Oxford universities in the distance.

“No,” Alexandra answered. “Based on their ultimate goal, I think it’s a step which will provide them a benefit in breaking the Statute of Secrecy and it will likely weaken the ICW, but how, I haven’t the slightest clue. The Venetian-Italian school isn’t built on an important convergence of Ley Lines; it only has two. It is not an ancient ossuary or a religious site dedicated to the Powers of the Dark. No great battle was fought there in the last two millennia. The school is the best one for the Italian peninsula and has a certain fame on the European continent, but it does not have as many students as Beauxbatons or Durmstrang, and has not manifested a recent desire to increase the size of their classes. The Venetian Houses which sponsor the school are certainly among the wealthiest families of Europe, but the Grindelwald War has been over for nearly fifty years, and all the surrounding countries have rebuilt themselves. Their elites are in a good position, but they aren’t *that* dominant.”

Maybe it had to do with the seven tasks themselves. Seven was a powerful number, both symbolically and in Arithmancy.

“Some of my superiors suggested that this is about eliminating as many Light Champions as they can in controlled conditions.”

“Somehow,” Alexandra said as she raised an eyebrow, “I think it’s a bit more complicated than that.”

**19 July 1994, Quidditch World Cup area, Dartmoor, England**

According to a French Muggle, the most important part of a game was to participate, not to win.

Morag thought that the supporters of the Wales National Quidditch Team would disagree a bit with her if she went ahead and shouted the saying with a magically amplified voice.

The tents coloured in red and white were extremely subdued this morning, and everywhere the MacDougal Heiress looked, the faces were switching between morose, angry, disappointed, and other beat-down feelings.

That was what happened when the players you had come to see triumphing suffered a disastrous defeat at the hands of the young team of Uganda. At least if the score had been relatively disputed before the Golden Snitch was caught by the opposite Seeker...but it wasn’t, and Wales had lost 270-70.

It wasn’t as much a humiliation as it had been when England was crushed by Transylvania, but it was bad enough for most of the British spectators’ pride, and those formed between one-quarter and one-third of the wizards and witches camping here on Dartmoor.

Fortunately for everyone, Ireland was qualified for the next round of competition. The Irish redhead preferred not to imagine the popular outburst which would have happened in the contrary case. Already she was wise enough to recognise there were going to be political consequences: the Ministry and the Wizengamot hadn’t accepted organising the World Cup just for the smiles of the players of Uganda and Luxemburg, or the Transylvanian parties that celebrated until dawn.

And really, Morag knew it was unavoidable that a member of the Traditionalists or the Conservatives would argue that all British teams had been eliminated, since after all Ireland was barely British in the first place.

Walking slowly through the dozens of tents, the Hogwarts student could only recognise the sheer amount of differences between the atmosphere of the evening when Ireland had won over Argentina and what she had observed since yesterday night. During the former, fireworks had burned bright for countless hours. During the latter, the few animations had come from the few African fans who had come specially for the event.

Morag held no grudges for the surprising victory of Uganda, but there was no denying that their victory had literally destroyed all the positivity which had existed since the Irish victory a week ago. Suddenly, all the local supporters remembered that for all the goals scored by the legendary trio of Moran, Troy, and Mullet, England, Scotland, and Wales had suffered a large defeat and ended their participation in the World Cup before it truly began.

The Irish Heiress would not be surprised to learn a lot of tickets originally bought by English or Scottish men were sold to foreigners in the days to come. She frowned as a powerful odour of alcohol arrived at her nose. Plenty of supporters had evidently drowned their sorrow in alcohol and the number of empty bottles was properly appalling.

It took her over ten minutes to walk through this unhappy spectacle, and by the end of it, Morag was relieved she was returning to Ireland this afternoon. Watching Ireland play had been fantastic, but the game between the Germans and the French – won by the French – had been a level below that, and then she had not been that enthusiastic to observe Peru-Spain. Uganda-Wales had decreased Quidditch quality to a new low, though. It was time to leave and return to her Animagus and magical training...among other things.

It was not far from that point where she found the two girls she wanted to sea.

“Oh look, Susan,” Hannah Abbot was the first to notice her. “We have an early riser.”

Morag chuckled as the two Hufflepuff girls absolutely didn’t meet this definition. Their hair in disarray and their sleepy expressions were not exactly subtle, and Hannah then went on to yawn for several seconds.

“You went on to party last night, didn’t you?”

“So what if we did?” Susan yawned too. “It’s the holidays. We have time and plenty of reasons to celebrate.”

“If you say so,” the MacDougal Heiress replied politely. “How many times has House Hufflepuff celebrated their victory in the House Cup, by pure curiosity?”

“We’re a bit fuzzy after twenty,” Megan Jones grumbled as she emerged from a yellow tent decorated with dozens of the badgers the Hufflepuffs were famous for. “Don’t tell me you didn’t celebrate when you won the Quidditch Cup, MacDougal.”

Yes, but they had celebrated for two days, not twenty. The same was true for Ireland’s victory. There was such thing as partying reasonably...that, and Alexandra could drink so much and still be able to take photos of them in compromising positions that it was best to not go overboard.

Being a Champion not only made you a monster in raw power, it also apparently gave you a monumental resistance to alcohol of all kinds, including Firewhiskey. It really wasn’t fair.

“Of course, we did,” the Ravenclaw replied before changing the subject and giving Susan and Hannah the letters that had arrived today with her parents’ chaperones. “Your letters, dear Badgers.”

“Alexandra’s birthday? At Zabini Manor?” Susan was a fast reader...when she wanted to be.

“And we have the Weasley Twins to provide the ambiance and the decorations,” the ‘we’, of course, should have been ‘Alexandra’, since she was both the paymaster and the benevolent investor in the domains where Fred and George were inventing and pushing back the limits of what wasn’t feasible. “Alexandra wanted to send you the letters by snowy owl and everything, but the Ministry has discouraged messenger birds from travelling here.”

Some nonsense about making too many excuses about bird travelling patterns and bribing ornithologists had been made, and few believed it. Morag personally thought it more likely that Fudge and his administration were incompetent or too busy fighting tooth and nail against House Malfoy to not be sued for millions of Galleons, and that that the Statute could go hang itself.

“So...your reply?”

“Of course she is coming,” Hannah smirked. “Both of them would be miserable if they didn’t see each other this summer.”

“Hannah...” the redhead of Hufflepuff growled.

“You know, she was already considering buying communication mirrors,” the brown-haired Hufflepuff said smugly.

Morag grinned back, sensing the opportunity to gain some judicious gossip able to counter all these photos a certain Basilisk-Slayer had made and fled with a week ago.

“Continue,” the Ravenclaw purred, her amused inner animal approving completely her choice.

“Hannah, not a word!”

“It just so happened that the last time the gorgeous snowy owl came to Bones Manor she was carrying-“

Everything the Hufflepuff was about to say was muffed when her best friend tackled her and placed her hands upon her mouth.

Too bad, it had sounded extremely interesting...

“What is happening here?” Morag abandoned her focus on the two third-year Badgers. The appearance of a very lightly clothed Cedric Diggory leaving his tent and the voice of Cho Chang somewhere inside told her there were more delicious rumours to fall upon...

**20 July 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

The moment the wards went up, Alexandra kept her eyes on her opponent and only her opponent.

The Basilisk-Slayer knew he was dangerous. She knew he was incredibly fast.

Then again, so was she. Becoming a Hydra Animagus had considerably improved her endurance and her speed, and the physical training she was doing every day boosted her skills.

But she kept her eyes on her opponent nonetheless. And then she waited.

She waited for him to go on the offensive as lightning sparks ran through her right hand and the fingers of her hand were tightened around her wand.

How long did they wait? It felt like an eternity, though most likely it was only a few minutes.

Her opponent was the first to move.

Instantly the air was filled with hundreds of conjured birds, from massive eagles to inoffensive canaries.

With her right hand she threw an overpowered Lightning-based Hex, and began to run. From this moment and until the end, staying immobile was synonymous with defeat.

Fire and lightning engulfed the space chosen for the duel. The birds were disintegrated, and those who were left, Alexandra transfigured into ice stalagmites before throwing them via Depulso towards the wizard.

It was for nothing. The ice melted and coalesced again to become a gigantic water dragon. Her answer was to slam an earth wall into the construct before she drowned in an overpowered Aguamenti, though the Ravenclaw Champion wasn’t fast enough to not be wet, to the great pleasure of her Hydra senses.

And she had lost the initiative. Arrows began to bombard her, and Alexandra had to change her skin into scales to get rid of those nuisances. Powerful jets of water struck her as she attacked again and again.

But her conjurations were too slow, and her spells were unable to hit the target she hurled incantations against. Her attempts to pour the maximum of water and let lightning hexes do the job, a strategy which had proved its worth in the last months, was not working.

If it had been regular duelling, she would have lost ten times by the points, but this wasn’t regular duelling, and her Animagus resistance allowed her to disregard most of the hexes and Charms as minor inconveniences.

The Bombarda which caught her in the chest propelled her into the protective barriers of the improvised duelling grounds, and an alarm shrieked to indicate the end of the match.

Alexandra groaned before standing again. Everything which had been bruised and broken was already healing, and in a few minutes, she would be as healthy as she had been at the start of this duel. The same couldn’t be said about her pride.

“I thought I had you with the Summoning Charm, Professor.”

“It was an excellent idea, Miss Potter,” Filius Flitwick, Head of Ravenclaw, retired Duellist World Champion, and for today, her tormentor, inclined his head almost mockingly. “But while I have been retired for a few decades, I have a lot more experience than you. A second round with new spells?”

The outcome of that duel was the same as the first, alas. The only good thing Alexandra had to say about it was that she ‘survived’ twenty more seconds before being smacked down by a miniature hurricane.

**Author’s Note**: For those who wondered if Alexandra could defeat Flitwick without going all-out in Hydra form...well, you have your answer.

If everything goes according to the plan, there should be two more chapters after this one before the (temporary) return to Hogwarts. Let’s see if my schedule works for a few months this time.

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