**Chapter 54**

**Hydra or not Hydra**

**12 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The fight was humiliatingly short.

Alexandra had not finished uttering the last words a great tail was obscuring her vision and she had to throw herself on the ground before it splattered her against the walls.

Except it had been a feint. A terrifying blast of lightning came her way, followed by three hungry maws.

Fortunately, she had teleportation. One second of concentration, and she was behind the monster.

There was a little problem, though. A hydra had no ‘behind’.

Already two heads were watching her, hissing in what she could imagine was a mocking tone. She was force to use Apparition once more, as poison was hurled in her direction.

The Ravenclaw witch tried to think of something to give her an advantage. There had to be one tactic, a trick or something allowing her to gain some advantage.

There wasn’t one.

Whatever mental or physical realm she had been sent to, her wand and Fragarach hadn’t followed her. As a result, Alexandra was limited to whatever spells she could cast wandlessly. It meant Lumos, Wingardium Leviosa, Flipendo and the low-level hexes...all of them completely useless against a Hydra weighting several tons and boasting a magical resistance able to shrug off the Killing Curse.

Only her teleportation skills were keeping her in the fight, and unfortunately the Hydra was adapting too quickly and had impossibly fast reflexes.

“Oh that is not good at all...”

Two of the heads had apparently judged the fight had lasted long enough and began to unleash their blasts of concentrated lightning at full power on half of the arena.

Alexandra teleported out of the way...only to receive a massive tail-strike in her back. For a second or two, the Potter Heiress saw the stars before meeting the ground in what was obviously a spectacular and non-academic plunge.

“Argh...” she didn’t know if it was real, but the pain lancing her was clearly not an illusion.

Three heads of the Lernaean Hydra towered over her and she couldn’t stand. Hell, she had difficulty raising her arms and making her legs twitch. Damn it, how many months had it been since someone had beaten her that easily?

It was hard to think, but it was likely having her wand would have made no difference. Most of the spells she knew were too weak and the lightning-based battle-incantations would reinforce her opponent, not harm it.

“You won, damn it. Happy?”

The nine-headed animal hissed in return.

“Sorry, I don’t speak Parseltongue...” the joke did nothing to help the pain she was feeling in her muscles, bones and practically everything which could hurt. Why was the hydra not finishing her, it was over, she couldn’t move...

Black feathers began to fall, and this was then Alexandra saw the multitude of ravens pouring from the gate. Many landed on the head, the coils, and the tail of her opponent. And all had eyes burning of the same green light.

**Prepare yourself**.

The hydra hissed and a torrent of black-green magic was expelled from the nine-headed XXXXXX-class creature. It struck her directly in the chest, but somehow, the worst pain was on her shoulder, at the location the Morrigan had marked her...

Oblivion claimed her.

And then she reopened her eyes, and she was back in the study room, with Lyre and Morag holding her.

“How...long...” her entire body felt weird. Good point, most of the pain she had felt moments ago was gone.

“You were unconscious for nearly two hours,” said the red-headed Ravenclaw in a tone which was extremely worried. “You started to scream sixteen-seventeen minutes ago...”

“Water...”

“You’re not a toad-Animagus, aren’t you?” Alexandra tried to laugh, but didn’t manage more than a series of cough. With hindsight, the joke wasn’t that funny anymore...

Once she had emptied two goblets of water, her strength was more or less back, but...her vision had changed. She had not needed glasses at any moment of her life. Now though, it looked like she had needed them for everything around her could be seen with an incredible sight. She could see every detail of her friend’s skin and clothes, notice the tiniest flaws and...

“What’s happening...this is an Animagus-revealing Potion, not something to kick-start a transformation or one of the powerful unlocking rituals...”

“Well, you should try to tell it to your body,” Lyre gave her a mirror and Alexandra flinched as her eyes had twice the brightness...and definitely reptilian irises.

The word she uttered was in four letters and was not to be repeated in polite company. Sill, when she willed her eyes to go back to their normal appearance, they did...and she also felt a rumbling in her chest of displeasure, like she had a monster imprisoned in her...and she feared it was true.

“How?”

“The books’ authors were not sure, but sometimes if you come from a long line of Animagi, it becomes easier to unlock the initial stage of transformation...that or it is linked to your own...particularities...”

Alexandra was ready to bet it was the latter. So many ravens around was the influence of the Morrigan, though given how little she knew of her parents, the former couldn’t be discounted as a possibility.

“Nigel, could you please try to make an appointment with Flitwick for tomorrow? I have a feeling I have just made my first steps on the Animagus transformation and I am going to need his help if I want to keep it under wraps...”

“Sure...if you tell us what sort of animal tried to smash you apart? Was it a Basilisk?”

“No, my dear MacDougal...Basilisks are too unimpressive,” she retorted, imitating the pompous arrogance of one Draco Malfoy. “Soon, I will be invincible!”

Hermione chose to launch a pillow directly in her head at that instant, completely ruining the triumphal moment.

“Hey, some respect for the Hydra Queen!”

**13 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The biscuits and the tea prepared by the House Elves were excellent. The screams of Captain Wood encouraging his suicidal followers to train beyond the limits of human resistance were arriving to their ears from the window. The Quidditch Cup was shining under the sun. Professor Flitwick was grading a few essays from the second-years. She could hear a hydra hissing in her chest.

It was an evening like any other at Hogwarts.

“So hypothetically, Professor, if a student had experienced some...complications with the Bayard- De Lain Animagus-revealing Potion, what would you advise her to do?”

Flitwick chuckled with a large smile on his face, raising temporarily his head from the essay he was grading.

“Hypothetically, Miss Potter?” Her Head of House knew perfectly the word was to claim denial if their conversation went back to the ears of the Headmaster. “I’m sure it has nothing to do, with the flashes of green emitted by your eyes right this moment...”

Alexandra waited a few seconds as Flitwick finished writing a big ‘EE’ on the parchment and pushing it on the pile of grade essays before replying.

“You look remarkably unsurprised, Professor.”

“Please give me a little credit, Miss Potter,” chuckled again the small Duellist Champion. “You are not the first, the second or the tenth Ravenclaw this year to try something...academically interesting which might not be entirely in conformity with the regulations imposed by the Ministry. For better or for worse, I have the charge of the House of the Wise...except the quest for wisdom is fraught with perils and problems many students all too willingly ignore at first.”

“I don’t know if I should be honoured to be in their company...” she commented in a light tone.

Flitwick drew his wand and murmured something in his beard, closing the windows and lighting the candlestick in one sweep.

“You were curious and came to me as soon you realise something was wrong. Believe or not, this places you above ninety percent of the Ravenclaw students. Last year alone, I caught two students of this House trying – and failing – to reverse problematical transformations. One had changed his head into a half-eagle half-human face, and it took me several hours of effort to give him back his original appearance before sending him to the infirmary.”

“Are you an Animagus, Professor?”

“No I am not,” Flitwick cheerfully affirmed. “I’m afraid I once saw my Animagus form when a Transfiguration master invited me at his home, found it funny but impractical...and I decided not to pursue it further in the end. Becoming an Animagi improves your understanding of yourself, but I was not interested in developing this aspect of my magic, and of course my form would have not granted me any advantage in Duelling.”

Quills and inkpots began to dance on the desk as the Charms Master agitated his wand like an orchestra master.

“But enough about me Miss Potter. First, I have of course to reprimand you...you after all tried to become an Animagus in secret.”

“I will consider myself...reprimanded, Professor,” Alexandra said drily.

“Good!” The smile Flitwick showed her had too many similarities with the one he used in ‘duelling practise’ of first-year for her not to feel dread. Strangely, the animal in her chest grew even more agitated, like it wanted to challenge her Head of House into a duel. “Secondly, I will tell you have in all likelihood chosen the right method to transform yourself. About ninety-nine percent of the serious incidents we have at Hogwarts with the transformations are due to the Merlinian method. Third, I must know how your body has changed in the last twenty-four hours.”

“I am...a bit stronger, I think. My vision and my senses have improved. I feel like I have a beast in my chest, trying to push me to be more assertive and aggressive. But the biggest problem was the fact I wasn’t able to sleep more than four hours last night.”

Flitwick’s joviality diminished and his expression became far more serious.

“These are...extensive changes, Miss Potter. Usually, these improvements come only after months of experimentation and being half-way through mastery of your inner animal. Hypothetically, if you had tried a Potion like the Bayard-De Lain revealing solution, what would your inner animal looks like?

“Hypothetically,” Alexandra insisted sarcastically on the first word, “it would be a Lernaean Hydra.”

“Ah,” and for the first time, Alexandra thought she had genuinely managed to stun into silence her Head of House. But less than three seconds later, Flitwick began to giggle loudly before exploding in full-blown laughter.

“Err...Professor?”

“Sorry, my dear,” the Charms Master giggled a few more times before regaining his smiling behaviour, but his eyes twinkled in mischievousness. “You don’t choose the easy path, don’t you?”

The green-eyed witch decided not to answer what was obviously a rhetorical question.

“You are very lucky in the fact you have practically won the Animagus magical lottery. I don’t think there are ten more powerful Animagus forms in the world. That’s the good point. On the other hand, I will not try to let you think mastery over your inner animal is going to be easy at all. It is virtually a certainty you are going to experience deep changes over your body and your mind, and since you are about to begin puberty you will have to find a way to live with them, for the predator will not leave you a choice.”

Alexandra nodded several times in acknowledgement.

“What’s the first step?”

“The first step...is telling me hypothetically how many of your friends drank the same Potion you did and if they experimented difficulties doing so?” Something in her gaze or her body must have flinched, for Flitwick laughed at her expression. “Miss Potter, I am not blind and deaf. You and your group were at every meal together...I doubt you would have drunk the Potion and everyone else showed a disinterest in the matter.”

Alexandra grimaced for a couple of heartbeats before deciding she might as well tell the truth...the others had not experienced any problems but if something bad happened...

“Hypothetically, Morag and Nigel may have drunk the same Potion. We had six doses, but we lacked time to try everyone and after my problems...not everyone was willing. Morag may or may not be a Bengal Tiger, and Nigel’s animal form should be a Wild Boar.”

“Not any complications for them?”

“No...they hadn’t my...skills in the first place, and they for sure don’t have any Animagi parents. Speaking of which, do you know?”

Flitwick’s hands accelerated the twists with his wand, his smile becoming more thoughtful.

“Since your parents were Gryffindors and I didn’t keep an eye on some of their...extra-curricular projects, I can’t give you a definite ‘yes’ or ‘no’, but I have strong suspicions the group led by your father had one or more Animagus wizard in their ranks. Some of their behaviour during fourth and fifth year was...definitely odd, even for them.”

Flitwick huffed and mechanically tapped his wand against the teacup.

“As for your mother, she had the talent to become one, but I am uncertain if she ever went through the transformation. I was in very good terms with her, but I wasn’t her Head of House, nor am I the Transfiguration Professor...”

“Assuming Peter Pettigrew was one...what would be the odds of my father being one too?”

“Close to one hundred percent, Miss Potter,” replied Flitwick, perfectly recognising the overture she had given him. “The Marauders were doing everything together, with the notable exception of their love affairs. Mr. Pettigrew was hardly the most gifted student in Transfiguration...Remus Lupin, Sirius Black and James Potter largely surpassed him. If one became an Animagus, the only question would be how long did it take for the others to catch up.”

Two parchments were conjured from nowhere and were levitated slowly in her hands.

“Second step is filling these forms and sending them to your guardian. I think Lady Zabini will...ease the license process overseas, shall we say? As I’m sure you’re aware, registering your Animagus form in Britain isn’t exactly an advisable move.”

“I will send the owl tonight,” she promised, as her inner animal grew more and more agitated. It was like she had cramps in her stomach

“See that you do. I’m going to attach you two House Elves for your meals. I went several times to Greece, thus I am aware the habits of hydras differ largely than those of a human. These apex predators are in theory omnivores, but by long and large they love eating fishes and consider eggs a rare delicacy. Meat comes after, and vegetables are only eaten if there’s nothing else on the menu.”

And she had just eaten...rabbit and vegetables several hours ago. It was no wonder the hydra inside her body was not happy at all.

“I suppose I am going to be piscivorous for a long time, then...”

“The Elves will be advised to provide you complete meals, but I’m afraid anything which is not fish, meat and eggs will not be appreciated by your inner animal. Maybe sugar and sweets will work,” amended Flitwick, “your cooks will have to test it.”

It wasn’t the first time Alexandra realised this was going to have big consequences...but still, it was already changing her life and the first week of change had just started.

The Morrigan must have had a good laugh when she had known how screwed she was going to be.

“I will assign you a personal room normally reserved for married couples by tomorrow,” Flitwick added as she tried to assimilate the size of the issues. “It will be connected to the common room, so you will be able to travel to it without leaving the tower.”

“I could stay in the common room...” Alexandra protested weakly.

“Unless you want to be renowned for your insomniac problems and raise the suspicions of others, no you won’t,” and Flitwick never removed his smile. “Moreover, hydras naturally need a lot of water so your new quarters will have a large bath to content your Animagus form. I recommend you are fully immerged twice per day in water and more if your scaly tenant decides it.”

In hindsight, the swimming lessons and the effort she had put in using the large swimming pool at Zabini Manor had probably been an excellent idea...otherwise she would have been stuck with an Animagus form which loved water while she was barely able to float on her own.

“I suppose this isn’t the end of the recommendations.”

“You have guessed right, Miss Potter. I would advise to take care well of your skin and every part of your body. The hydras of Greece tolerates their dozens of handlers because these devoted specialists take care of their scales, fangs, claws, baths and every aspect of their health. I know physical activity is not a problem for you, but take care of your appearance. Hydras do like being considered attractive.”

Well, if her sleep time was non-existent, at least she would have something to spend her nights with.

She was so busy trying to cope with this idea that the smirk of Flitwick went almost unnoticed until it was too late.

“Professor?”

“I will inform you in advance hydras can change their sex at will and have in general a really...free attitude when they want to mate. Your preferences are your own problem, but I think you should be advised to...not bite, when your inner animal tries to influence you in this direction. Hydras respect power and are attracted by it.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. Thank you Professor for this helpful point,” surely Lady Zabini couldn’t have known it would come to this when she had given her the ‘Talk’ this summer.

“Anything for my favourite student, my dear,” Flitwick smiled beatifically, “I will leave some books in your night quarters to help you complete the Animagus transformation...which hypothetically, may last between six and fifteen months if you are willing to give your best.”

Well, that at least was encouraging. If she became a true Animagus before her OWLS, this would give her a big trump card for the future and eventual Masteries...

“Now please go find the rest of your little group and inform them I want to speak with them. Oh, and Miss Potter?”

“Yes, Professor?” She demanded as she stood from the too-comfortable chair.

“Do not explain to the Weasley Twins how to become an Animagus unless you want to be my sparring partner, five times a week,” the hydra hissed threateningly but Alexandra ignored her without difficulty. Fred and George able to transform into animals...unregistered...no, the world wasn’t ready for this.

“Yes, Professor.”

**18 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Watching Alexandra Potter recite the rune activation incantations, even without any power poured in the words, was something extremely interesting. Susan did not consider herself late in the curriculum Professor Babbling had imposed on the third-years who had signed for Ancient Runes, but the glyphs did not answer the same way they did for the Ravenclaw.

“By the power of the ice and the gems, bring forth the bark of the wave and the destruction of the doomed, cover this world in frost and let this earth sleep, ISAZ!”

The examples of the eleventh rune which had been carved or painted somewhat flickered in a blue light, sign the incantation had been correctly pronounced and no flaw had been found in her work.

“It’s impressive,” she admitted. “I can only do this for the first five runes. You’re far more advanced than anyone save Hermione Granger.”

The Exiled Queen tried very hard not to look too satisfied.

“I have advantages you lack...and besides I have not managed to complete the evocation of the first twenty-four Elder Futhark runes. Fehu, Thurisaz, Ur, Ansuz, Raido, Kenaz, Gebo, Wunjo, Haglaz, Naudiz, Isaz, Jeraz, Eihwaz, Elhaz, Teiwaz, Berkanan, Ehwo, Mannaz, Laukaz, Ingwaz, Dagaz and Odala are not giving me any problems, but I have difficulties with Sowilo and Perthro.”

“Everyone has difficulties with Sowilo and Perthro, Alexandra. These two are without doubt the most powerful runes of the twenty-fourth, the power of the sun and the power of time, fate and the immutable cycle of seasons.”

“Hmm...” the thoughtful expression the green-eyed girl made when she was thoughtful was just too cute. “Any idea why Longbottom’s scar looks like so much an incomplete Sowilo rune?”

Susan blinked. This was not something she had ever thought about, to be honest. The scar of the Boy-Who-Lived was incredibly famous – or infamous from the point of view of certain Dark Houses – but nobody knew how the Killing Curse had been reflected...nobody alive at least.

“There are no rituals involving Sowilo runes, to the best of my knowledge,” she replied carefully. “Most runic Galdr, Lokk, or ritual circles instantly collapse if you add Sowilo. This is the sun rune, so by its very nature it burns everything and the effects...well, they can be catastrophic if you have poured too much power in the structure.”

“Maybe Longbottom’s mother found a way...”

“Perhaps, but if she did, no one has come around to tell he has recreated the method to stop the unblockable Killing Curse.”

“Can’t disagree with that,” the tone employed by the Ravenclaw girl should have sounded like a grunt, but it came out of her lips like a hiss. “You who bring shelter and prosperity, the defender of the home, guard us from sorrow and anxiety, protect us from the pain, WUNJO!”

The white sparkles were the confirmation another simple evocation had been achieved. Using the seconds where her black-haired year-mate was busy examining her scripts in her chair, Susan let her bag near one of her seats and moved discreetly until she was right behind the busy Ravenclaw.

“You should relax, you know,” and she began to massage the shoulders of the Potter Heiress. To her honest surprise, a powerful hiss came from the mouth of Alexandra.

“Continue that,” the command had been laced with magic, because Susan obeyed by reflex for the next half-minute without thinking until her thoughts returned to normal. Continuing the massage, she lowered her head until her lips were a couple of inches away from the ears of her ‘patient’.

“My, my, someone has been a busy bee. Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, becoming an Animagus...how do you find the time to relax, poor girl?”

“I...don’t...know...what...you’re...talking...about...Susan...” moaned her ‘victim’, unaware her green eyes were flashing with various shades of magical green and her ironclad control was completely slipping away.

“Please, dear,” Susan couldn’t help but smirking and lowered her lips further until she almost touched the cheek of the Ravenclaw. “My aunt spent a couple of years in the Netherlands after the war as part of an ICW force running after foreign Animagi and trying to stop their numerous thefts. She taught me the signs...and you show all of them.”

The inner animal of Alexandra Potter had to love the massage, though, because she didn’t even try to draw her wand or to snap at her, she just stayed in her chair, hissing and demanding more.

“Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me,” the Bones Heiress promised. And she was serious; she had not told Hannah, knowing very well her friend would be unable to not spread the information all over Hogwarts by sunset. “I just want a little payment...a kiss...”

Alexandra Potter moved so fast Susan was unable to react. One moment she was doing a massage to a hissing girl, the next the talented Ravenclaw had seized her and forced her on the floor. Then their lips met and they kissed. It was...magical. For a second, she almost thought to protest but as flesh met flesh, a thunderstorm of power arrived to her head and she moaned, returning the kiss and...

“When I thought we would be together for a Rune project, I didn’t expect you two to use it for kissing practise, you know,” the kiss stopped, and both girls turned to watch Daphne Greengrass in the entrance.

Alexandra stood rapidly before giving her a hand and stopping her to mumble on the floor. Susan stood on shaky legs and her heart beating. Wow, that had had been a rush...none of the ‘practise kissing’ she had ever done until now had been so powerful and mind-boggling.

“You were late,” commented bluntly the green-eyed witch, touching her lips and evidently still experiencing the rush of their kiss too. “We were discussing...runes...and one thing led to another...”

The Ice Queen raised her eyes in the air, obviously not very interested in the reasoning. It was then the red-haired Hufflepuff realised the hairs of the Slytherin had taken a horrid orange colour.

“The Golden Trio unleashed a new series of pranks, I see...”

The Greengrass Heiress nodded with a sour expression.

“Malfoy may have stopped making himself a fool, but the ‘Golden Trio’ and their goons have not stopped causing us headaches, lately,” the distaste was clear on her face. “And they are resistant to the counter-jinxes...”

“Finite Incantatem!” Alexandra cast, and after a powerful grey ray, Daphne Greengrass returned to her perfect blonde-haired appearance.

“I tried the same thing ten times...” the Slytherin murmured incredulous. Susan shared her surprise but chose to hide it behind a good smile. Alexandra Potter was getting more powerful...not that there had been many doubts after last year.

“Most of the pranks imagined by the Weasley Twins are a work of art and difficult to unravel,” the Potter Heiress explained in a teacher-mode found in all Ravenclaws. “Unravelling their pranks is complicated and in general tends to activate second or third-layers pranks, so it’s generally not worth the effort to dispel them. But with the other Gryffindors, overwhelming firepower is often the easiest solution. When I’m not around, Morag and Hermione are casting the counters together and it’s in general sufficient to stop nine out of ten pranks. The only exceptions are when Longbottom gets serious and is pushing a lot of his magic in a scheme.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Daphne bowed in an uncharacteristic expression – for her - of gratitude.

“You can join us for the next kissing session,” Susan proposed, making Alexandra blush a deep red and the cold of the expression of the Ice Queen falters.

“I like boys, not girls...”

“Ah, too bad,” it was maybe a bit too early to say in public Susan liked both. Fortunately, the green-eyed witch was busy blushing like a tomato and she didn’t deny her kissing preferences, “What is the program for today, great group-leader?”

“First, we have to decide if we work together for the group project of third-year,” Susan rolled her eyes.

“Of course, we will, noble snake,” it wasn’t like she was going to run after Crabbe, Goyle or Weasley and beg to be part of their group for a minable project. She was well aware she was a Badger, but even fairness and teamwork had their limits with cases like this. She was the niece of Amelia Bones, and she had ambition to figure high in the rankings, thank you very much.

“I vote to learn the Ecclesial/Patronus,” Alexandra spoke, her serious face returning. “In all likelihood, it will be extremely useful given what is waiting outside the wards. The Dementor-repulsive spells are technically Charms, so we can ask for Professor Flitwick to be our Professor-overseer. We will probably get good marks in DADA, no matter how crazy our current DADA teacher is.”

Daphne didn’t wait long before openly disagreeing.

“Maybe you have the raw power to cast twice or three times one of these spells per day, but Susan and I haven’t your reserves right now, Alexandra. No, I was thinking more about creating a Web of Shadows. It’s an OWL-level Ward able to protect a manor or a house from Dark Creatures, in case you haven’t heard of it. It requires a basic knowledge of Arithmancy, competency in Elder Futhark Runes and a few dozen Charms. It doesn’t require the sheer power Ecclesials and Patronuses require every time you want to cast it.”

“That sounds interesting,” Alexandra Potter admitted, though Susan could hear the ‘but’ coming. “But none of us have the slightest training in establishing wards of any kind and I can tell you we are busy in Arithmancy analysing the structure of Wingardium Leviosa and the number principles it operates. At least with an Ecclesial or a Patronus, all we will need to learn is how to cast it. With your...’Web of Shadows’...we will triple our work charge and honestly I have already a mountain of homework and things to do. Studying Hieroglyphs on our own will already be taxing. I won’t jump in joy at the idea of adding more homework.”

Susan felt quite justified having taken Ancient Runes and Divination for electives hearing this from the enjoyable lips of the Potter Heiress. That said, she feared both girls were too ambitious given the hindrances – lack of time for Alexandra and lack of ability for Daphne.

When the Slytherin girl turned towards her in support, Susan shook her head.

“I think your interests are well-reasoned, but you need to build on stronger foundations. Let’s face it, girls. Unlike the Hieroglyphs, we still have to produce something successful at the end of the year. And your projects, while quite interesting, have good chances of ending in failure.”

“And what do you propose, then?” asked Daphne Greengrass in a voice which was certainly not very friendly. Seriously, this girl needed to smile more. Her sister wasn’t that stern, was she suffering from something?

“I propose we learn the Summoning and Banishment Charms. We will have Flitwick to grade us. We write a long dissertation on our experiments and demonstrate our proficiency with those Charms. This will get us an ‘Exceeds Expectations’ minimum, and once this is over you can decide between you two whose project is the more interesting and likely to be successful for fourth-year and above. Moreover, these spells are useful both at school, at home and in many situations...and you won’t have to practise in fourth-year to master them, which will make the path to the OWLS easier.”

To her relief, Alexandra and Daphne both appeared to consider her words. And after a dozen seconds, the green-eyed Ravenclaw nodded.

“Okay, I’m in.”

“Did she bribe you with kisses?” retorted Daphne.

“No, but since you mentioned it, perhaps I should make it a condition of my participation...” the dreamy smile she received gave her a pleasant feeling in her chest.

The third member of their group maintained her haughty and dismissive glare, however.

“Come on, Heiress Greengrass,” appealing to her sense of friendship and team spirit was mostly useless, as everyone knew the inhabitants of the Snake’s Den were vicious and proper aristocrat bigots. “You will get better Charms grades that way...and more study time for everything else.”

The next seconds passed in a heavy silence, before the cold blue eyes began to lose their hostility.

“It is not a question of Charms or specialty...my parents weren’t impressed by my grades the first two years. If I don’t raise my grades and impress them, it is entirely possible the Heiress title will go to Astoria and there will be a marriage contract with my name on it before I sit my OWLS.”

Susan knew her face had turned distinctly non-amused, and Alexandra looked like she had the urge to vomit. Yeah, at certain times it was really easy to remember that Wizengamot Houses like Greengrass were Dark, and not just magically. They were Dark because their methods to train their children and the speed they could cull their familial trees was ruthless and bordered on fanaticism.

“And you believe they will...sell you to an elder wizard for an advantageous price if you don’t improve?”

“I don’t want to wait and discover on my fifteenth birthday that I am destined to marry a wizard twice my age. Would you?” The crack in the Ice Queen’s armour was shown and underneath was fury. “My father, for all his talk about talent and the tenets of blood, has just enough OWLS and NEWTS to be accepted by his peers. But if I become a Ward-mistress like my grandmother, I will be able to decide my own fate...”

“There’s another method to decide your own fate, you know.” Susan had to make an effort to collapse in giggles as Alexandra tapped her wand on a parchment and several little human figures appeared only to be killed when a volcano fell upon them. The moment of hilarity over, she made a mental note to press her new kissing-partner to not resort to a violent actions just because it was simpler.

“Yes, yes we know the ‘Basilisk-Slayer Potter method’,” if Daphne hadn’t been so trained to be the perfect pureblood princess, she would have raised her eyes to the ceiling once more. “Kill most of your enemies and terrify the rest.”

“It works,” declared the Ravenclaw, completely unrepentant. “And my new guardian will not try to arrange a marriage contract for me without my blessing.”

On this, Susan had to admit Alexandra Potter had a point. Merlin and Morgana, she wasn’t sure that even if Dumbledore had stayed her magical guardian, the old wizard would have tried this sort of political shenanigans with her. The Headmaster might be old, but he was not suicidal...she thought.

“It is unsubtle and undignified,” stammered the Slytherin witch.

“Whatever you say, Daphne,” and Alexandra changed the topic of the conversation. “Fine, let’s speak of the Egyptian hieroglyphs before the hour is out and dinner is served. The Ancient Runes ICW-recognised system is the Keter’s list, standardised in 1590, which includes nine hundred and thirty-nine glyphs divided into thirty-two categories. I think it is best if we meet twice per week, one to memorise the runes, and the other as a practical session where we carve them in stone under Professor Babbling’s supervision...”

Susan listened to the words arriving to her ears, but mentally she was mostly observing every detail of the Ravenclaw third-year she was working with. She liked what she watched...and she wanted more. Before Samhain, she would have a long date, hundreds of kisses and possibly more with this cute girl, or her name wasn’t Susan Bones.

**21 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“The homework Trelawney is asking us to do on our free time is a joke,” affirmed Nigel in a tone that demanded no debate.

As they followed him in the short-cut behind the tapestry, none of the Exiled contested this point of view. The Divination Professor had rapidly become a source of jokes and humoristic comments in public – a fact helped by the reality that Trelawney, unlike most Professors of Hogwarts, was never seen strolling through the corridors. Really, she didn’t come to eat in the Great Hall that often. Before the end of second year, Alexandra could count on her two hands the number of times the not-Seer had graced them with her presence, and so far third-year wasn’t breaking the tradition.

“She doesn’t care if we do big calculations or learn the symbols of *Unfogging the Future*. All she cares about is the death omens and the unhappiness future events will bring us. If you say you’re going to have a very boring morning and a Quidditch session without problems after you studied your cup of tea, she most likely will give you a ‘P’. If you tell us your friend is going to fall from his or her broom, she will give you an ‘O’.”

“It’s not too late to change to Care of Magical Creatures, you know,” commented Hermione. “Professor Grubbly-Plank may not be the most...charismatic teacher, but she knows her job. We are learning the living habits of several interesting animals. Do you know the Mackled Malaclaw’s bite has the same effect as a powerful Misfortune Curse?”

“Maybe I will,” replied Nigel after an instant of hesitation. “It was pretty worrying the first time to listen to this fraud predicting your death and Longbottom’s unavoidable bloody demise, but she’s doing it at every class. It’s nice to have a class where you can do your homework in less than a hour eyes closed, but I don’t think the academic prospects are worth it.”

Morag murmured something in approval as they climbed a new series of stairs and Alexandra wasn’t going to disagree. As a potential Hydra Animagus, she only slept three or four hours per night with one or two period of rests after dinner or by midday. Hermione and the rest of the students had not this chance. The homework charge for third-years had increased massively and September was not yet over. In Arithmancy, Professor Vector’s promises were respected: they were analysing and studying the numbers, the wand movements and everything there was to study in the first year-spells. It had gotten so bad the numbers and incomprehensible equations were pursuing them in their sleep. In Ancient Runes, they continued memorising and studying every different rune of Elder Futhark. Since unlike what the non-magical population believed, the twenty-four symbols had four or five different meanings depending the context and several layers of evocation, this was far from an easy task.

And that was just the electives she took – how Hermione managed to take three at once, her two plus Care of Magical Creatures, she had no idea.

In the mean time, the teachers of the core classes had not decreased the rhythm. Potions had begun with the particularly difficult Shrinking Solution and now they had started their first practises in some Potions giving temporary protection against cold or warm environments. In Astronomy, they studied the influence of Saturn over the harvest of certain herbs and fruits. In Herbology, they studied Puffapods, Cepegiants and various mushrooms.

Transfiguration and Charms had taken another level of difficulty. Professor McGonagall had told from the get-go this year was going to be taxing, and so far she and the Junior Professor were giving them headaches with their new calculus and exercises. During the first session they had to transform an inkpot into a mouse, and this had been the beginning of the inanimate-to-animate spells. So far, Alexandra, Morag and Hermione had managed to change little bronze statues into rabbits, but not perfectly. The Gryffindors which were in the same class were badly lagging behind: only Longbottom had been granted the authorisation to transform the rabbit so far; girls like Lavender Brown or Fay Dunbar had not yet resolved their inkpots’ problem.

As for Charms, they were practising Construction Charms, which included for example the first incantations you used when you wanted to cross a river under anti-Apparition wards and you have no bridge around. You had to manipulate the earth around you with precision and power to build a bridge of stone and mud...seeing their Head of House doing it like it was nothing told them how far they were from mastery in this domain.

And DADA...was DADA, and accessorily the class they were travelling to this fine morning of Tuesday. No, by far the only class which was the same as second-year was History...and unsurprisingly, her inner animal was not immune to Binns’ droning. This was a source of amusement...and the next time they faced something dangerous, the solution imposed itself: they would throw the boring ghost against whatever danger threatened them. Best case, the monster would die of boredom and Binns would pass in another realm as the effort dissipated the ectoplasm.

“So Alex, do you intend to drag your girlfriend in a broom closet after the class?”

Alexandra closed her eyes and tried to ignore the hissing of enthusiasm from the hydra coiling magically around her heart.

“I do not kiss her in broom closets, Morag,” she considered it a great victory she managed to speak the words, not hiss them.

“That’s right, you prefer abandoned classrooms,” nodded Hermione, projecting a wise and knowledgeable aura around her.

“Well you have to admit...”

Whatever Nigel had been about to say, he didn’t finish the sentence as she drew her wand from her holster and agitated it idly.

“Who I kiss is my business, minions and scoundrels...and if I hear something of this in the *Loud Duck*, you will regret it for the rest of your year.”

She still didn’t know what had taken her from kissing the Bones Heiress. Some part of her wanted to blame the hydra and the changes wrecking her body and behaviour, but fact is, she had liked kissing the redhead. A lot.

So much in fact she had done it several times before the week was over. And more times after that. Alexandra enjoyed the taste and the smell of Susan, the perfume and the magic of the Hufflepuff girl and she couldn’t say she was really influenced by outside factors. Her inner animal liked a lot the massages on her shoulders, but Alexandra was in control...she thought.

“The Queen hath spoken,” said dramatically Morag. “We hear and obey, your Majesty.”

“As it should be,” she said sticking her tongue out of her mouth and throwing a hex which missed Morag by several feet intentionally. “Peons should know their place in the grand order of things: there’s me, me and me...and everything else at my feet. Any questions?”

“Nah, and don’t worry, we won’t write anything...I think every student of Hogwarts know by now.” Alexandra blushed, but Morag wasn’t finished embarrassing her. “We know she makes you happy, it’s only a question of time before you invite her in your private quarters for more...”

“Continue, and I will really hex you,” she threatened.

“We will take the risk, we will take the risk...” repeated Nigel singing it like an irritating folk song.

Alexandra smiled but inwardly wondered when the situation had grown so strange. On September 1, she had believed the biggest personal change in the times to come would be her new guardian. Now? She was spending three or four times per twenty-four hours taking warm baths to content her inner animal – which was not a fluffy little cat but a hissing Lernaean Hydra. She had eaten in the last week more sea food than she remembered doing in her thirteen years of life and had tried to use half of the cosmetics in her trunks to calm the big snake. She could change her eyes, her eyes, and only her eyes. Oh, and yes she loved kissing Susan Bones, because she liked a lot girls.

“Have you decided if you will go ahead for our little Transfiguration project now that you know the final result at the end?”

“Yes,” replied Morag, “though my parents insisted I wait the winter holidays to activate the process...you know, the normal way, not the illogical one. That way I will have two weeks in a secluded environment and no huge quantities of homework to deal with.”

“No,” Hermione’s voice was hesitant. “I don’t want the changes...”

“No,” Nigel imitated her one second later. “I don’t want to be a boar...”

“Who would have believed that of all the people in our little group, the Lions would flee at the first obstacle?” taunted the red-haired Irish Heiress.

“Now, now Morag, I’m sure they have their reasons. I mean I found a girl to kiss, so it’s possible Hermione has a boy hidden in a broom closet somewhere...”

“Quidditch player, big muscled and gentle like a grumpy bear,” Morag thought aloud. “Maybe one of these ‘bad guys type’...they love smart girls who are staying in the library...”

“Hush, you two!” ordered the former bushy-haired Gryffindor.

The two other Ravenclaw girls laughed. But in truth, it was not that surprising that Hermione and Nigel had for the moment refused to entertain the prospect of becoming Animagi once they had seen their inner animals.

Unlike Morag, who had discovered she would be able to transform into a Bengal Tiger and emerged quite happy with it, Nigel and Hermione had not been that pleased.

The only boy of their group may have wanted something inspiring nobility and courage...sadly for him he had gotten a Wild Boar.

Hermione had drank the Potion and for about two hours and twenty minutes – the longest period of trance of the entire group – she had awaken and raged she had been forced to play in freezing water with an Antarctic Fur Seal. It was a beautiful animal in Alexandra’s opinion, but their librarian-expert had not shared the general enthusiasm.

On the other hand, Lyre had told them she would wake up her Snow Leopard by January-February – that way neither Lord Malfoy nor any of her relatives on the continent would be able to stop her once they were aware of it.

As for Luna Lovegood...sigh...her Animagus form –which had made her dance in the clouds of felicity – was a platypus.

Yes, look at the picture, laugh, and try to say it didn’t suit her.

You couldn’t, no?

“We will have to be careful, of course,” Morag spoke in a far lower tone as they approached the DADA classroom. “I saw the Golden Trio sniffing around the small Animagus section in the library yesterday, they may try to find clues we broke the rules.”

This revelation made Alexandra pause before another possibility came to her mind.

“It may be a coincidence,” Nigel snorted loudly at her proposal. “No, I’m serious. Maybe the Gryffindors aren’t trying to compile evidence against us. We know for a fact the library is heavily concentrated on the Merlinian method. Isn’t it possible Longbottom, Black and Weasley are trying to become Animagi on their own?”

“It’s true the law-breaking certainly won’t stop them,” recognised Morag. “Though every book and source we have been able to learn from – and it includes Professor Flitwick – insists the Merlinian method is incredibly difficult and can somehow destroy both mind and body at the first error. We are not speaking about behaviour changes like the one Alex experiences; there are people who stopped the process after they were permanently stuck into a hybrid-human form...”

They had to stop the conversation there, unfortunately. There were Hufflepuffs arriving from another section of stairs, and none among them had any reason to trust Zacharias Smith.

To the general relief, the class chosen today by Professor Rincewind appeared to be a classic one, not something likely to be used for a practical lesson. During the first, the war veteran had forced them to fight a bunch of Mimics and on the second, he had created some golem-constructs and forced to cast every spell they should have learned for three years of Defence education. As only Susan and the Exiled had achieved passing grades in the subject, the mood after these ‘lessons’ had been horrible. Many Badgers had been heard to say they couldn’t wait the Defence Curse to strike.

Alexandra would dearly have wanted to sit with Susan – DADA and Potions were the only class they had together, but Hermione had wanted to sit in the first rank, and by the time Susan had arrived, the only seats available were those in the rear.

Half a minute after Leanne Malone sat, an orang-utan jumped in the room eating a banana, the wooden door closed loudly and the third class of DADA began.

“Good day, class!” said Professor Rincewind as he retook his human appearance. “Today we are going to have our first class on the creatures your Ministry recognises as Dark by their ignorant standards. Since I was unable to secure the authorisations to bring such beings in a classroom, these classes – one per month for those who want to know – will be entirely theoretical.”

Letters were written in blue flames on the blackboard.

**DEFENCE LESSON NUMBER THREE**

**THE VAMPIRES**

The wizard who had fought against the forces of Grindelwald left no time to the whispers to gain strength in the classroom and began to speak in a calm tone but Alexandra didn’t miss the...frustration or was it anger?, more like frustration – underneath.

“I reviewed the lessons of the idiots who taught this class the previous years. You can forget nearly everything they taught you about vampires. No, forget everything they told you. Mr. Afraid-of-his-own-shadow and Mr. Narcissist have in all likelihood never met a real vampire in their entire life, or if they did, they certainly didn’t recount you the real encounters.”

A vigorous gesture of the staff and all exclamations to protest the integrity of the DADA teachers – not that there had been that many – died in the throats of the students.

“The most important thing to remember about vampires is that blood is everything for them. Their hierarchy is based on it, their oaths are signed in it, they drink it and they fight until they have none left. Blood is their greatest strength and greatest weakness, with only sun light coming close. There are three species you are likely to meet if you live in Europe, students. The first is the *Vampiri Noctis*. It is thought to be the most ancient species of vampires.”

An image was projected on the blackboard and Alexandra thought she heard several girls and boys shout in shock. What was in front of them...it was certainly not human. It looked like a corpse...a corpse with claws, long teeth and parodies of bat-teeth.

“These vampires are not powerful physically and boast no great magical skill save their ability to fog the mind of non-magical. They thirst for blood, and are literally mobile corpses. They have an extreme vulnerability to all sources of light, which explains how most of their lairs are underground.”

Other images were shown. There were vampires opening the throats of humans, animals and screaming in anger.

“One vampire alone does not represent a grave danger. Whatever intelligence they had before contamination doesn’t survive the first days once they have crawled out of undeath. Unfortunately, while they’re more rabid animals than rational beings, they are not individualistic predators. Instinct will push the Vampiri Noctis to gather in large numbers and transform more men and women into monsters until they feel their group is sufficiently large. And it can be the limit will not be reached until the two hundred-three hundred mark.”

“Questions, Miss Abbot?”

“Does that mean, Professor, garlic has no effect on them?”

Rincewind chuckled and it was not feigned. Alexandra shivered as the hydra somewhat thought it was a sound of challenge.

“No, Miss Abbot, it is best to forget the garlic. It wouldn’t be practical anyway. Any spell like *Lumos Solem* or *Lumen Vindicta* will kill them if sufficiently close, and a good Blasting Charm in the head will also probably make sure they are not a problem anymore. Allow me to emphasize: these vampires have no regeneration skills and will probably attack like a group of vicious and bloodthirsty animals. To the best of my knowledge, there are none in Britain and they haven’t been since the Statute was established. Nowadays, there are mostly found in the Balkans, where the lack of central authority makes their eradication difficult. A point which will reassure you is that this vampirism does not work on wizards and witches. If one Vampiri Noctis kills a wizard, no matter how much blood has been drunk or ingested from both parties, the victim will be dead.”

The images changed to represent other vampires...which looked like pale humans in vaguely antiquated clothes.

“The *Vampiri Orientem* is the most common species of vampires found in Europe. Like their name implies, their most numerous covens are in the east, Transylvania, Hungary and Russia mainly. Outwardly, they are not that different from albino humans or extremely pale-skinned people. Unlike their Noctis cousins, they are quite civilised and their governments are feudal in nature, the most powerful vampires ruling and imposing their will upon the newly transformed and the weakest. The Shadow Blades which have caused so many problems to the London Ministry are Vampiri Orientem.”

The red-robed wizard took a large inspiration.

“At the risk of repeating myself, garlic and the rest of the mythical weaknesses of the vampires are of no utility. You can bathe a vampire in verbena, and at best you will manage to slow down your opponent or make him laugh. Religious items are doing nothing unless they have been charged in esoteric – and illegal in Britain – rituals. Moreover, the Orientem species is far stronger than the Noctis breed. The weakest vampire is twice stronger physically than a man at the peak of his strength, they can see perfectly in the dark and their senses are overdeveloped. Light spells, fire and decapitation are the best way to deal with them.”

“Can they transform wizards into vampires?” asked Roger Malone.

“In theory, they can.” It was not a reassuring answer. “In practise, few do. It is a long process, and if a wizard or a witch survives the long torture it seems to entail, he or she will have lost all magic anyway. The most powerful Orientem vampires can use Thaumaturgy – Vampire Blood Magic – but their ability to do this apparently destroys the abilities they had when they were human. No, when they want to change wizards, Orientem vampires prefer to infect them with a were-animal curse. Many infamous Vampire Lord and Ladies can command skinchangers packs or prides.”

“This is outrageous!” exclaimed Zacharias Smith in his irritating voice.

“It is what happens when you treat your neighbours like dirt,” retorted philosophically Erasmus Rincewind. “Five points from Hufflepuff for the outburst, by the way, Mr. Smith. Now what did I want to say? Ah, yes.”

The images of relatively human vampires were replaced by beings which were definitely not. Here, a man threw away a car with what appeared to be little effort. Some scenes showed muskets and firearms failing against figures soaked in blood.

“The third species of European vampires and the least common is called *Vampiri Romani,* for they are believed to be a crossbreeding experiment ordered by Emperor Nero of the Roman Empire. If the last writings of the period can be trusted, the bloodthirsty Emperor wanted immortality, and he was not shy giving gold to his Wizarding elite to achieve that dream. Unlike most other species, they have ivory skin and eyes shining like gemstones. They are also far, far stronger than the Orientem vampires and during nights, between their senses and their Thaumaturgy powers, the Romani vampires are more than a match one-on-one for a trained wizard. Add to this their apparent immortality, and you have formidable opponents. Thank whatever deities you believe in that so far, the few existing covens have refused to support Dark Lords like Grindelwald or more local Dark Lords.”

Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws alike grumbled indignantly hearing this, though it was the truth. Grindelwald had presented a massive threat for the world and especially for Europe. Voldemort...didn’t. Alexandra wouldn’t raise an eyebrow if there were students in Spain, Scandinavia or Eastern Europe who hadn’t the slightest idea Voldemort had terrorised Britain during long and bloody years.

“Due to their speed and strength, light-based spells and excellent control of your battlefield are absolutely necessary to survive a battle with these centuries-old beings. Flee as fast as you can when confronted with a hostile vampire of this species and for magic’s sake, never insult them or question their integrity...that path ends with your corpse floating in a pool of blood...”

Their teacher closed his eyes, like he was trying not to remember many horrors he had seen in their life.

“Err...Professor? These vampires can’t transform wizards and witches into vampires, no?”

“There has been no proof they can in the last centuries, but sadly given their rather secretive nature since the Statute of Secrecy was enacted, I can’t answer positively or negatively...now open your book on page 104 and read the instructions for the Vampire-repelling spells...”

**26 September 1993, Hogsmeade, Scotland**

Hogsmeade was nice village, but honestly it was a very small village and the opportunities of doing something worthwhile weren’t legion. At least it was Alexandra’s opinion after the Weasley Twins had described her with a lot of colourful adjectives the shops and various activities one could do in the Scottish magical settlement.

“It is smaller than Diagon Alley for sure, “recognised Fred when she voiced out loud her opinion. “And when we students aren’t authorised to visit the village, we were told it is a rather dead place. The goblins were forced to leave after a treaty in the 1810s...I think.”

“Several Potion and Herbology shops closed during the last war too,” added George. “Many places are worth seeing once, like the Shrieking Shack or the Wizarding Wireless Network Headquarters, but by the end of third year it begins to lose its charm.”

“Too true, my ugly brother,” nodded gravely Fred. “Of course, there still are the basic cauldrons, robes, telescopes and everything for classes from first to seventh year. If you want a massive supply of sweets, Honeydukes is for you. The Three Broomsticks Inn is perfect to taste Butterbeer though we never managed to convince Madam Rosmerta to serve us Firewhiskey. Zonko’s provides the pranks’ arsenal, and Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop is where you want to invite your redhead girlfriend.”

Alexandra rolled her eyes. She liked kissing Susan Bones, but she had seen the ghastly pink of the place and the Hogwarts rumour mill had dozens of spies in and out the place. If – and she insisted on the ‘if’ she was given a date for Hogsmeade –which had not happened yet – she was not going to trap herself in a place where pink had contaminated common sense, beauty and privacy.

“Continue making remarks about my private life, Twin Terrors, and once we get out of the meeting, I will hex you. If you’re lucky, you will be able to sit without trembling when your Monday morning classes come...”

As they had marched in a quick rhythm, they were largely ahead of the rest of the students when they came in front of Tomes and Scrolls, the sole and only bookshop of Hogsmeade.

“Are you seeing the lawyer, Alexandra?” demanded one of the twins. “There are too many grumpy old hats looking at us I don’t know which one we are supposed to meet...”

The third-year Ravenclaw simply smiled as she saw the elegant brown-haired woman stand right behind them as the pranksters of Gryffindors continued to banter. Lady Stella Zabini had given her the identity of the law expert she had hired two days ago when she had known she had to assist to a diamond business meeting in Spain today.

“I thought my daughter was exaggerating your love of mischief,” huffed Andromeda Tonks nee Black, smiling as the prankster duo jumped and turned around to discover her identity. “A pleasure to see you again, Alexandra...my, my...you have grown in the last month.”

“The pleasure is mine, Mrs. Tonks,” of course in the next seconds she was told to call her ‘cousin’ or ‘Andromeda’...Alexandra decided on the latter. Calling someone over three decades older than you ‘cousin’ just seemed weird.

“I have rented a room for the next couple of hours,” and the Ravenclaw witch and the two Gryffindors followed her in an alley to the right of the bookshop before entering a charming ancient house and climbing antique stairs to the first floor.

Once they were seated around a middle-sized round table and removed their cloaks – it was not winter, but the temperatures last week had begun to fall considerably – they went straight to business.

“Our Ministry totally lacks the interest to invest or regulate the shops making their affairs in tricks, pranks and other celebration business. It is a good thing: you avoid most problems of taxation, influence struggles and feuds which arise everyone want to open a Cauldron or an Apothecary in one of the shopping districts.”

After several minutes of brutal but necessary procedures, the Weasley twins were handed two identical golden keys which were instantly recognisable as Gringotts vault keys.

“The owner keys of your vault, per your recommendations. Alexandra Potter will sign the money transfer in her quality of Heiress Potter in a few minutes, and per the agreement you signed two weeks ago, one thousand and five hundred out of two thousand and five hundred Galleons will be accessible on April 1 1995 when you will be legal adults and able to choose a location where to sell your goods. I suggest you keep a bit more gold than this available to use...your first job experience in the real world isn’t always a shiny affair and can sometimes cost a lot in unplanned spending.”

A few dozen signatures and contracts later, the brown-haired lawyer which had last summer demanded to be her guardian delivered a speech her business partners may not have expected to hear today.

“Officially, I have of course no authority to oversee the results of your OWLS and NEWTS. But since I know you are pranksters to heart, I will advise you not to put all your eggs in one basket. Whether you like it or not, academic performance is something important in our society and laws can change over time. As the lawyer who will give my support for the idea of ‘Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes’, I must insist that between you two, you achieve the OWLS of Charms, Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration and Runes. ‘O’ and ‘EE’ are not necessary, but you must at least reassure any foreign or local inspector you know your basics...as well as your parents, I think.”

The twins grimaced in perfect unity, giving the impression they had been caught with their hands stuck in the sweets’ jar. It was incredibly amusing to be amusing of this scene; Andromeda Tonks had not raised a single time her voice, and yet it was absolutely true she had in the space of a few seconds pushed the two students least likely to apply themselves in class to study seriously for their upcoming exams...

Ultimately, it took over one hour and forty minutes to fill all the forms and agree on the minor technicalities. Alexandra removed the two thousand and five hundred Galleons from her Paris vault – it had been credited with the twenty five thousand Galleons of Zonko’s shares thus it was hardly going to be empty once the sum was transferred to the Twins. In exchange, she owned thirty-seven percent of the future shop which she hoped was not going to be known under the acronym ‘WWW’. The two Lions departed with ironic parodies of military salute and tanks, and Alexandra found herself alone with Andromeda Tonks.

“Are you happy?” the hydra hissed in an offended manner in her, but Alexandra ignored her inner animal for the moment. She would plunge in a bath at her return to the castle, but for the moment the sensibilities of the monster were not important. After all, it was not often adults asked her this question. Lady Zabini had, several times, and Flitwick did, sometimes. Most of the Professors and adult wizards and witches she had met were more interested about what she represented than how she felt.

“I am,” she answered. “I have friends, and the people I care about know who I am.”

“Good,” the smile of the lawyer was wistful. “My sisters and I forgot too long to form ties during our childhood, I am glad you don’t make our mistakes.”

“You’re not going to give me the rehashed speech I am my father’s daughter with my mother’s eyes, don’t you?” Alexandra asked sarcastically.

Andromeda Tonks chuckled before taking her serious posture.

“I can’t pretend I knew your parents very well. I was far older than them, I was sorted into Slytherin, and until the war I had no reason to frequent them. The Potters were cousins, but until I married my husband, I was firmly told to avoid them. And since I want to be completely truthful, I wouldn’t have wanted to be in your father’s circle anyway. Before his parents died, James was a very arrogant young man and his pranks were far crueller than every mischief your Weasley Twins have imagined. These were different times, yes, but I’m sorry to say your father didn’t emerge with a good reputation from the Gryffindor-Slytherin House wars...”

“And my mother?” Alexandra demanded quietly.

“Your mother was the reason I grew closer...although I must admit we didn’t have time to be more than acquaintances. I met Lily several times after she came back from Southern France in 1980 and she was officially an Enchantress, and we spoke lengthily at a few receptions. We were both vocal supporters of magical freedom at a time the Ministry was busy passing edicts right and left to prohibit spells and diverse ancient traditions. I’m afraid the last time I saw her was when she had just been told at Saint Mungo’s she was pregnant with you.”

“Thank you,” this was not much, but at least Andromeda had remembered, unlike too many people. “Thank you for not forgetting her.”

“You’re welcome...and now I think it is time to speak of the trouble you plunged into.” The elegant woman who had once been recognised as one of House Black’s stars smirked. “Concerning your rule-breaking, I must admit you have inherited your father’s genes. Most students are waiting after their OWLS to take decisions to impress their friends or their partners...”

“Lady Zabini informed you, then.”

“Oh yes,” and the smile grew larger, making Alexandra wonder if she could get away with jumping by the window and teleporting hundreds of miles away. “She gave me a list of questions, ah here they are. In no particular order:

The redhead or the blonde?”

“The redhead, Daphne doesn’t like girls,” and then she shut her mouth, realising the priceless ammunition she had freely handled to her guardian and her cousin.

“Good to know. Lady Zabini suggests the green robes with large cleavage...now she wonders how flexible you can be with your Animagus form?”

It was a nightmare. It had to be. And the hydra was hissing mockingly, relishing her embarrassment, so no help there. And yes, she was aware her visage had to be redder than a tomato.

“I want another lawyer...” The Potter Heiress groaned in despair.

**28 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Ironically, before taking the Animagus-revealing Potion, she had not taken a lot of baths in her life. Petunia Dursley or her walrus of a husband had threatened her enough times when she spent too many minutes in the shower for her to risk it – never mind her relatives were sometimes wasting half an hour of water each. The bathrooms they had their bathrooms linked to since first year had no baths, only showers. She had heard this was one of the privileges usually granted to the Prefects, though she had not seen one of these rooms with her own eyes. Thus in the end, the first time she had ever truly taken a bath had been in the small swimming pool-bath at Zabini Manor but frankly, filling the pool was taking long enough for her to prefer the showers nine times out of ten.

Now that she had a hydra hissing every time she cast a spell or did something controversial, the midnight baths had become a habit. It was...relaxing, to be honest. After rushing from class to class, ending the homework, eating voraciously seafood and practising duelling or any other physical activity, the baths offered a moment to calm down. And if it calmed the hydra which had become her inner animal too, well she was not going to complain.

Shaking her head, she reprimanded herself for these thoughts. According to all the books put at the Exiled’s disposition, she was not supposed to make the difference between the hydra’s needs and hers. It was difficult.

Like the whole Animagus process, in fact. The Bayard- De Lain method insisted to transform part after part of yourself until you completely merged with the inner animal. The eyes – the mirrors of the soul as they were poetically called – were the first thing she could change at will. And...that was it.

For the moment, she could change a bit her visage, cover her hands in black-gold scales and generate some scales on the rest of her body but that was it. And to do most of this, she needed her wand. Yeah it was difficult, and every day she was reminded there was a reason why Human Transfiguration was in the NEWTS program established by Professor McGonagall.

Various authors had proposed alternatives – meditate until you found your inner animal and go back confront it for another round of battle. So under Lyre’s supervision, Alexandra had done it. The second round had practically gone the same way as the first – there had been no Archway of Death this time but the Lernaean Hydra had made her fly several times with incredible facility.

The water of the bath was becoming cold once more, and Alexandra left the water, seized a towel and began to dry up. A great hiss informed her the hydra would have wanted more time to enjoy the contact of water against her skin. Alexandra sighed. She was taking nearly four baths per twenty-four hours – generally two at night, and the two others arranged depending on her schedule, but she wondered why destiny had chosen this predator to be her animal. She had learned swimming less than a couple of years ago, and apart from its lightning affinity, Alexandra could not say she had much in common with her inner animal...

Fortunately, there was good news too. Flitwick had closed his eyes and agreed to bungle the classification of several forms, so she could spend the nights in these quarters and not bother anyone. The elves had put in the strict minimum; a small bed, a small table, two chairs, the bath and the various bathroom facilities, a desk and a small empty library to store whatever she was working on during her ‘insomnia phases’, as her friends had taken to call it.

Two days ago, Andromeda Tonks had also given her the copies of official documents proclaiming now that Alexandra Victoria Potter, as a ward of Lady Zabini, was granted the Venetian dual citizenship. The Ministry of Venice had also accepted under seal she was trying to become an Animagus. She would have to present herself to a Healer next winter and summer holidays to verify she wasn’t turning her organs into paste, but legally, she couldn’t be pursued by the British Ministry for an illegal transfiguration-aptitude.

It was a good thing, because she didn’t think she was going to be able to hide it for the year or year and a half the process was going to take. Susan had already known in a matter of minutes, Daphne Greengrass must have her doubts...and certainly the Twins must have their ideas on the question too.

As she put on clean undergarments and robes, her thoughts returned to Susan. Alexandra was ready to admit she had grown very fond of the red-haired Hufflepuff in a few weeks...they did not talk a lot, but damn she loved kissing her and losing herself in these amber eyes...

“You like her too, don’t you?” she murmured to the hydra and a hiss which was the equivalent of a purr resonated in her mind.

And then someone knocked at the door. Once, twice, three times.

“It’s three in the morning...who isn’t sleeping at this hour?”

Yes, she was awake, but she had slept from eleven to two, a good three hours of sleep, and the power now coursing in her veins was apparently sufficient to erase all tiredness and exhaustion from her body and her mind. At this hour, the rest of the castle slept soundly, unless particularly violent thunderstorms woke up the light sleepers but there had been no storms she was aware of.

“I’m coming...” She grumbled as the knocks resumed.

For that matter, aside from her friends only Flitwick and the seventh-year prefects knew the password of the portrait leading to these quarters. The green-eyed witch glanced at the lone mirror to be sure her attire was mostly presentable and no trace of animal transformation was visible. After that, she opened the door...and met the eyes of a girl she had very little reasons to like.

“Cho Chang,” the third-year Ravenclaw closed her eyes for a second to see if she wasn’t in an amazingly good illusion. “You’re up early.”

It was not her best opening, but what do you say to a girl who is clearly not your friend and you meet in the middle of the night?

“I know Professor Flitwick would never give you the password to open the portrait to access this room, and Penelope knows you and I aren’t friends. Would I be correct in assuming some bribery of the seventh-year Prefect boy has occurred last evening?”

The Asian gave an infuriating smirk.

“Everyone has a price and his was ridiculously easy to pay,” the Ravenclaw fourth-year shrugged. “Besides, he was convinced I needed to give you an urgent message from Roger Davies about the team.”

“And there isn’t,” Alexandra affirmed. After all certain boys and girls were Quidditch maniacs in this school – may Oliver Wood steps forward please – but few would have been willing to wake up at two or three in the morning to give a message alone.

“Oh, there is one,” contradicted Cho Chang, “we have a meeting in about fourteen hours in the common room, titular and reserve together. Dumbledore summoned the Captains yesterday, there have been changes in the match schedules. We are going to play Gryffindor instead of Hufflepuff. And to make it more problematic, Jeremy and Jason have been temporary ejected from the team by Flitwick; they are failing half of their classes and per the informal agreement of Ravenclaw Tower, they can’t regain their place in the team until their grades have climbed up to an ‘Exceeds Expectation’ level.”

Ah yes, she had almost forgotten the speech of their Captain ‘being on a team is a privilege, not a House sponsorship’. Idly, the raven-haired girl wondered how many students would have been thrown out of the Lion’s team if they respected the same rules. Fred and George were accomplished pranksters no one needed to introduce anymore, and Wood breathed Quidditch, ate Quidditch and worshipped Quidditch at every moment of the day and night.

Of course, this didn’t exactly comfort her at the very likely possibility of being drafted for a match against what was certainly the most experimented Quidditch team of Hogwarts.

“I see. Well, you can tell Davies I will be there...as soon as he wakes up in three or four hours, anyway.”

She moved to close the door...and quite predictably, the other witch advanced to block her.

“Please, Heiress Potter...I plead for...ten minutes of your time.”

Her stomach chose this moment to growl in hunger and Alexandra winced at the reminder having a hydra for inner animal consumed her energy reserves at a terrifying rate. Advantage: she was not fat and probably never would be. Drawback: she ate a lot of seafood and meat. At least she made the House Elves happy...

“The House Elves are going to bring me a meal. You have exactly as long as it takes me to eat it to convince me.”

There were a lot of things she could forgive, but Cho Chang had been a bully of the worst sort last year, and it had taken several painful lightning spells to ‘convince’ her to stop the petty thievery and nasty pranks she used against Luna Lovegood and several younger students. Cho had not renewed her attempts this year...though another girl named Marietta Edgecombe known to be Chang’s friend had to be disciplined by Head Girl Penelope Clearwater a month ago.

The Asian-looking girl had been polite, though, quite unlike many Gryffindors who thought that just because she was a corridor turn away that she couldn’t hear them. So yes, then minutes of interview, were all she was going to give her. She took one of the two chairs, sat and licked her lips at the great piece of salmon the elf-cook named Jirsy had brought with her last apparition.

“Right. There are many students who saw you with the Weasley Twins at Hogsmeade. Plenty of rumours are floating around, telling you may pay them in gold and silver to prank those who don’t share your ideas.”

“There always are hundreds of rumours coming from Gryffindor Tower,” Alexandra replied while digesting her first swallow of the delicious Scottish salmon. “That doesn’t mean they are truth.”

Since the beginning of the year, some had ranged from the impossible – how was she supposed to command the Dementors to guard Hogwarts, she had no idea – or the ridiculous – that she had cast the Imperius Curse on Susan and was preparing to cast it again and again until she had over a hundred girls in her harem.

This new gossip was almost reasonable by comparison. The problem was the fact Hogwarts was filled with greedy imbeciles. Already three Slytherins and one Gryffindor had proposed themselves today to spy upon their housemates in exchange of a few coins. Did they take her for a dunderhead? The simple fact they had come forwards to betray their House guaranteed they were untrustworthy. If their loyalty was that fickle, it was guaranteed they would betray again and she was not going to risk being the one they would attack in the back.

“But yes, I went with the Weasley Twins to Hogsmeade,” it was impossible to hide it, no matter that after the meeting with Andromeda Tonks she had joined back Morag at Honeydukes. “Whatever we discussed is private and will stay that way.”

“Brown and her circle think you are trying to break Gryffindor in several factions for your nefarious and dark plans. But I think they were wrong.”

“Oh?”

“I think you are trying to sink Zonko’s by financially funding their successors.”

Damn, it looks Chang had a functioning brain after all. Or rather, when she didn’t use her mind to bully young girls, she could be a Ravenclaw worth the name. However, it raised interesting questions why she had come in the middle of the night to her quarters...

“I hope you’re not expecting me to confirm or to deny it. My deeds are private, and my reasons are my own,” this was business done in the name of House Potter. The Exiled were aware of what she had signed with Fred and George, but Cho Chang was certainly not a friend or someone she trusted.

“Oh, I know. But assuming I guessed rightly, I can offer you a chance to challenge the Headmaster in a way which will hurt him.”

“Err...” Alexandra let her fork and her knife on the side of her plate. The hydra growled as the salmon stopped arriving. Strange, she had not exactly considered Chang as an anti-Light supporter...

“You seem like you have a grudge against our wise and benevolent Defeater of Grindelwald...”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Cho Chang’s had struck the table with an impressive strength for someone who wasn’t an Animagus or a muscular boy. “Grindelwald’s allies in Japan unleashed plagues and other lethal diseases, killing half of my grandparents’ household and forcing the rest to flee to India...all the while Mr. ‘I had the power to defeat the Dark Lord’ stayed quite safely at Hogwarts while the world burned. And apparently, he didn’t bother finishing the job, did he? He imprisoned Grindelwald, while this monster deserved a thousand times to die slowly for his crimes!”

The voice of the fourth-year Ravenclaw had become more and more passionate second after second. In these instants, she didn’t sound like a Ravenclaw at all...more like a Gryffindor. Not that Alexandra was going to say out loud, she was not crazy.

“I have my own reasons to be...less than fond of Dumbledore,” the Potter Heiress admitted. The debacle of her guardianship audience was common knowledge by this point, so pretending the opposite was not believable. “But I am unsure how you can contribute.”

The green-eyed witch rolled her shoulders before taking another piece of salmon to feed the hydra in her belly.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, some of his political moves are sheer nonsense, but the man’s power and skill with a wand hasn’t diminished in the slightest since 1945. It is entirely possible he would win a duel against the three most powerful Professors and the three most powerful students...at the same time. And he was the only man to hold his own one-in-one in duel against Voldemort,” interestingly Cho didn’t shivered at the mention of the name, though she had done it last year when ‘You-Know-Who’ was mentioned.

“Alchemy,” and the simple word cut the night. “Alchemy is the source of his wealth and half of his fame. He is the sole real Alchemist worthy of the name on British soil, the rest are just his lackeys japing for his treats. If you want to build a powerbase against him, you need an Alchemist on your side.”

“And you propose yourself for the role?” Alexandra was sure her friends would forgive her if she was a bit dubitative. “You realise that since Dumbledore is not going to accept an Apprentice from Ravenclaw House, any attempt to become an Alchemist will need to be done in self-study.”

And the Alchemy books were rare. Daphne had graciously loaned her some from her family for a few hours of lecture, but most were full of incredibly complex riddles and enigma, with incredibly complex pentagrams and arithmantic equations. There was no section pertaining to this subject in the Hogwarts library – either it had never existed or it had been moved elsewhere. For a novice like Alexandra, these books were too complicated and didn’t allow her to learn anything, and obviously not the basic principles.

“I’m aware of that,” said serenely Cho Chang.

Alexandra frowned. This was not the reaction she had expected.

“Then you are also aware you will need an Alchemy lab and Dumbledore has never opened his Alchemy lab to any student as long as he taught as Hogwarts,” but then she supposed that after 1945, the three positions he had been granted – Headmaster, Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump – reduced his free time to nothingness. “And without a location to practise in security, our own Head of House will refuse to let you experiment...”

Filius Flitwick was jovial and nice, but he wasn’t going to close his eyes if the risk of Alchemy explosions was real – and it was, history was littered with the corpses of thousands wizards and witches who had tried to create the Philosopher’s Stone.

“That’s why I want a partnership and build a lab outside Hogwarts,” explained the Asian-looking witch, fixing her with her midnight-black eyes. “I lack the raw power right now to be a high-level Alchemist and for my mother, paying the fees in order to let me attend Hogwarts was a considerable investment. I have not the money to finance the lab, and in all likelihood I will need several rituals for my magical core...but my ancestors had a lot on the subject and my parents were able to take the best works in exile.”

“It’s well reasoned, even by Lady Ravenclaw’s standards, but...why now?”

“The Tournament of next year,” Cho revealed with a thin smirk. “Whatever Dumbledore’s plans are, I am ready to bet he will be busy watching over his enemies and political opponents, plus promoting the superiority of the Gryffindor-pig behaviour of course. The Scuola Regina has an Alchemist department, a small one admittedly, but it has one. If I can lay the foundations this summer, I may pass my OWLS overseas and then begin networking for clients and supporters all over Europe...and Dumbledore will not be able to intervene.”

Well, this was a fine plan...nevertheless Alexandra was going to check if there were books on the Chinese famous lines. Alchemy lore was precious, and the humble ‘Chang’ family having them was technically possible but unlikely. More likely ‘Chang’ was the name they had taken after arriving in India with whatever meagre possessions they had been able to save.

“How many Galleons are we talking about?”

Cho Chang uttered a number.

Alexandra whistled in shock.

“Why aren’t you in Slytherin? You certainly aren’t lacking in ambition...”

“Why aren’t you in Slytherin?” retorted the fourth-year Ravenclaw. “You certainly have no problem murdering people and beasts in gruesome fashion...”

Alexandra giggled before eating the salmon in large bites. Once she had finished, she opened her mouth to give her verdict on the intriguing proposition.

“I need some time to think about it, Heiress Chang,” she said formally. The sum she had invested in Fred and George’s dream was literally nothing compared to the number Chang had spoken, and hypothetically if she said yes, she would need to use money from the family vault once it was unlocked. It said nothing of the risks, too. By the time ‘Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes’ opened, the only person who was at risk to lose money was Sirius Black and she. Neither House Black nor Alexandra were exactly poor by the standards of the Wizarding World, so it wasn’t like there were going to be a lot of repercussions or hundreds of people impacted, unlike with an Alchemy market competition. “I will give you my answer before Samhain.”

“You have my thanks for listening to my plea,” and the fourth-year black-haired witch left her quarters with a final nod.

Alexandra thanked the House Elf for the meal, marched to the portrait and modified the password. She would have to give it to Flitwick and Penelope, but honestly she wasn’t going to leave this weakness active for more time than it was necessary. Chang or an unfriendly Ravenclaw could have entered when she was taking her bath...at least this discussion had been good to prove the other seventh-year Prefect could not be trusted to do his job.

Taking a quill and an inkpot to complete her Arithmancy homework, she remembered the entire conversation and arrived to an entirely uncomfortable conclusion.

“This entire Tri-Wizard Tournament...or whatever name they chose to name it...it is a gigantic trap...”

The hydra hissed in agreement, but it truly provided her no comfort.