**Author’s note:** Since today is my birthday and it is well-known you can do everything you want on your birthday, I have decided it will be...update time! Ha! Ha! Ha! You hadn’t seen it coming, no?

Don’t believe though, this will happen every month. This is the exception which confirms the rule and a not-so-little chapter to help you as you await the New Year. As always, many thanks for my lovely minion, err, I mean my dedicated beta MasterQwertster, who had the courage to correct two of my chapters in two weeks.

More links for the story:

On P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

On TV Tropes: ww w. tvtropes pmwiki / pmwiki .php/ Fanfic/ TheOddsWereNeverInMyFavour

The next un-betaed chapter will be updated first on p a treon around the 10th of January I think. Mhh...what I have forgotten? Ah, yes I suppose Happy Holidays again, don’t expect too long answers for the reviews as we all want to drink champagne, enjoy the chapter and prepare to celebrate 2019...

**Chapter 53**

**The Inner Animal**

**2 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Quite predictably, Hermione’s hand was in the air before anyone had the time to blink.

“Yes, Hermione,” Morag’s tone was very amused. “You can lower your hand, there’s no teacher here.”

“At the risk of being rude, what the Hell is this thing of Morrigan’s Champion and why haven’t we been informed?”

Alexandra closed briefly her eyes before fixing her gaze upon her bushy-haired friend. Well, so much for the hope she would be able to dance around this question. But the Unbreakable Vow was still in the game, and unfortunately it was for good reasons.

“It is the position of Dumbledore and the Ministry that the Old Ways are nothing more than dangerous superstitions and disastrous relics of the past,” she answered after several seconds searching for the correct words and make no mistake. “But magic is more than that. There are entities beyond humanity. Call them Gods, Powers, or soul-infused manifestations of magic, but their existence has been continually proved by wizardkind.”

“And they are Dark.”

Lyre chuckled but it was not something joyous.

“I would suggest you abandon this point of view fast, Hermione. It is common knowledge in the Old Families that there are seven Powers of the Light against Six Powers of the Dark, and don’t even begin to think it is Good against Evil.”

“How so?”

“Because one of my ancestors was a Champion of the Light,” the young French witch bared her teeth in derision, “and he participated in the Fourth Crusade to sack Constantinople. He murdered without remorse hundreds of men, women and children, and he looted many Byzantine artworks which are exhibited in our ancestral castle”

Hermione for once stayed with her mouth open and an expression of absolute incredulity on her face.

“Both Light and Dark have been choosing their Champions for millennia to fight against each other in this world. By nature, Dark is more individualistic and Light is collective, but there are exceptions. Of course, the British Ministry tries very hard to pretend all ritualistic aspects and worships of them are nasty and must be punished with the greatest severity.”

“In their defence, the Death Eaters countained a lot of Old Way partisans and it proved their point.” Nigel countered.

“So the Morrigan is a Dark Power...” whispered Hermione. “And you, Alexandra, are her Champion.”

Alexandra didn’t move a muscle at this affirmation, although she felt a certain form of relief too in her heart. After that, all of them around this table knew everything there was to know about her...save Luna, but the girl was mangling an old magazine of *Witch Weekly* and appeared to be completely uninterested in the conversation.

“There was a Vow involved afterwards, so I will not say if you are wrong or right.”

“Prudent of you,” approved Lyre. “Any Ministry flunky wanting to send you to Azkaban would be prompt to dose you with Veritaserum if they had even the slightest suspicion you were a Champion.”

Minor surprise, it was Nigel who looked like he was going to protest the integrity of the Ministry, not Hermione. But the former Gryffindor had to have played in his head all the instances where Fudge and his cronies had ignored their own regulations, for he nodded reluctantly after twenty seconds.

“Where does it leave us?” asked Hermione quietly.

Alexandra gave her a sardonic smile.

“Well, my dear Granger, in the hypothetical case I was doing something forbidden by the Ministry, I can promise you I have not thrown around any Dark Curses, for I know none.”

“There were debates to declare the Imperial Thunder *Fulmen Imperator* exactly that,” commented Morag after a discrete cough.

Alexandra shrugged in annoyance.

“Sure, and if they want to ban the entire arsenal of battle-spells and elemental-based magic, they can go right ahead. This way, the next time a Dark Lord rises, they won’t be able to cast anything more dangerous than an Expelliarmus. The very definition of Dark Magic is supposed to be ‘esoteric spells fuelled by hate-based emotions’, not ‘spells which have the potential to cause an injury’ because let’s face it, even Wingardium Leviosa can be deadly in the wrong circumstances.”

The Potter Heiress sighed.

“Does that satisfactorily answer your question, Hermione?”

“It will have to do, I suppose...” Hermione bit her lower lip in intense concentration. “Except on one thing: do you think the Exchequer has a Champion in their service that provides them knowledge on us?”

“I suppose...it’s possible. There are not exactly sorcerers or sorceresses scared by breaking a few laws. It is even possible they have several. But short of a confession by one, we have no way to know.”

It was all bad speculation, and they knew it. Everyone promised to look around if there were methods or indiscretions which could have put the Exchequer on their tails, but the discussion turned to the contingencies in case of attack; here too it was rapidly ended as the plans would take weeks and certainly would not be easy to implement if the Dementors stayed at the gates.

“The newspaper is next, Nigel?”

The auburn-boy consulted his notes. Alexandra noted that his eyes were turning a darker colour after this summer, tending more towards a neutral brown.

“Luna and I have exchanged several letters, and Lyre added her knowledge of French newspapers. We agreed on one title: the Loud Duck.”

“And a motto,” chipped in happily Luna Lovegood, “the newspaper which quacks loudly what Hogwarts whispers”.

Oh dear, with a title like this...

“I can’t believe I am asking this question, but...are we intending this newspaper to be serious or semi-serious?”

“Serious, of course! All our sources will be verified and we will check all events and incidents reported have really happened in an impartial manner.” Nigel made a small grimace. “I propose, however, we write with pseudonyms and in semi-anonymity. That way we will avoid a lot of problems...”

Morag raised her eyes to the ceiling, no doubt praying for the intervention of a Power to save her from the impending jokes.

“How much will it cost us?”

“Assuming we go on with a six page-newspaper for the first edition and we publish around five hundred of them to cover teachers, students, and a few people like the Governors...five Knuts per paper...we should arrive at five Galleons, one sickle and six Knuts.”

“Add the extra-costs and inquisitive researches,” said Morag, “and we arrive at six Galleons.”

All in all, it was manageable...but they would have to convince students and adults to subscribe if they wanted this journalist attempt to endure. The next fifteen minutes were for the details of who was going to write what subject. Nigel and Luna took the first page, the tribune, and the headlines, Lyre took the foreign and international news, Morag seized Quidditch, Hermione decided to grab the law-scandal section, and she...received the gastronomy-culture page.

“Let’s speak about the Animagus or becoming Animagi before curfew is here,” she groaned. After such a long day and the lack of training due to the summer holidays, her hand was aching.

“I can have the standard Animagus-revealing Potion in ten days,” Lyre proposed like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“It is dangerous!” Hermione protested. “Professor McGonagall said only Transfiguration Masters were able to handle it!”

Lyre rolled her eyes, obviously disagreeing with the new Ravenclaw witch.

“No, only Transfiguration Masters are able to handle what you British called the Merlinian Method,” the correction was done in a tone which showed how their French friend cared little about the sensibilities of the Ministry. “Thank the Powers, other wizards have progressed in the last centuries and invented more practical animal-changing methods.”

“Yes,” said cautiously Morag, “but without the Merlinian’s greatest strength.”

Lyre stood like a pale stature for an instant before slightly inclining her head in assent.

“That much I will grant you,” the blonde pure-blood turned her head in direction of Hermione. “With the Merlinian method, you simply absorb the animal ability and limit to the minimum contact with the essence. In short, you are an animal, yet you avoid gaining most of their habits, quirks, ingrained distrust towards other animals...”

“Ah, so this is why Professor McGonagall can be a cat Animagus and have almost no cat-like traits?”

Lyre nodded slowly while brushing her long blonde hair.

“It is incredibly likely, yes. I’ve observed her on several occasions, and she doesn’t eat anything looking like cat food or the like. She doesn’t purr or behave like a cat at all. If she used another method than the Merlinian one, her control is simply phenomenal.”

“One minute, please,” most of the books hadn’t spoken of the Animagus transformation with such behavioural issues. “With the other methods, how much does the animal essence influence someone?”

Lyre simply smirked.

“Everything,” was the curt but terrifying answer. “Becoming an Animagus changes you in all aspects. You and your inner-animal’s food preferences begin to coalesce bit by bit. You win many of the physical strengths, but also the weaknesses, whether they are its behaviour or some physical inability...some animals can’t swim to save their lives, for example.”

“I’ve heard,” Morag sprouted a carnivorous expression presaging nothing good, “the inner-animal can give you the sexual preferences of...”

Alexandra tried to smack her, but too late.

“Yes, it usually plays a role,” replied serenely Lyre, ignoring the agitation in the room. “My family...well...they tried sometimes to ignore this with unpleasant consequences.”

She didn’t elaborate and no one dared ask about the dark secrets of House De Male-Foi.

“Anyway, the Bayard-De Lain method is known in Europe to be one of the best ways to acquire an Animagus form. I looked it up this summer, and it was developed by a Franco-Italian couple and legalised in 1970.”

“Other strengths of note?”

“You gain the essence of the animal, and consequently it gives you the equivalent of high-level Occlumency. Except High Masters of Legilimency, nobody is able to read your mind anymore, and depending on the danger posed by your inner animal, even the specialists might prove hesitant to risk their sanity plunging into your thoughts. Your healing capabilities and resistance to diseases are vastly increased. You are immune to the were-being curses and most wizard-cast maledictions. The Bayard-De Lain method is also noted to come easier for those who have parents and grandparents who became Animagi.”

“Still, the drawbacks...”

“Give me a little credit Hermione, I proposed to drink up a Potion to see what we could transform into, not to begin the method immediately.” Lyre opened a book to reveal a page showing a funny transformation: the wizard transformed into a fluffy rabbit.

“Many witches and wizards stop their attempts to become Animagi when they see their form. If you are deadly afraid of heights, I can assure you becoming a bird will be the last thing on your wish list. Some warlocks known to be ferocious duellists are afraid of large bodies of water and will not try the transformation if they know they will transform into a fish.”

Seen like this, it looked like a large percentage of the magical world abandoned by choice the path to transform into an animal.

“Add to that the fact some people have no Animagus form, and yes it happens sometimes,” Lyre said as the other Exiled voiced their surprise, “and the heavy restrictions some Ministries like the British one placed on the wizards and witches making the attempt...”

“I propose we test the Potion,” said Morag with a large smile. “What’s the worst thing possible, Alexandra becoming a trout? NO! NO! NO!”

For the record, the red-haired Heiress really deserved that jinx. Alexandra was ready to swear it in front of the Wizengamot.

**4 September 1993, Crouch Manor, England**

Of all the surprises she had experienced since the Azkaban break-out, the state of Crouch Manor had to figure in the top ten. Merlin and Morgana knew the Ministry was a bunch of pathetic wizards and witches, so any stupidity coming from them was expected. But a Noble House refusing to update or literally rebuild its ancestral wards when the Heir had been arrested and sentenced for his participation in the activities of Death Eaters? If she had not been certain Bartemius Crouch was a Slytherin, she would have thought he was a Gryffindor.

Yes, many powerful witches and wizards were at Azkaban, but there were a lot of former Inner Circle members in liberty too. And the former DMLE Director should have been far too experienced to believe the Dark Lord had not widely disseminated the information among his lieutenants. Money was also not an issue. Crouch was a Most Ancient House and its Lord was the last of the main branch, thus it wasn’t like he was going to receive a lot of protestations from potential Heirs if he spent money on security and new defensive procedures.

Bellatrix Black smiled as she ordered the spectral shade of Bartemius Crouch Junior to return to the jewel where his ghost and the essence of the Azkaban inmates she had killed awaited her orders. Then she entered Crouch Manor, throwing a last glance at the immobile four Hit-Wizards and three House Elves which had been knocked out by the very wards they were supposed to trust as an alert warning and a frontline shield.

Most of the wards were by now deactivated, but she nevertheless cast obscuring Charms, an illusion on herself to appear like a House Elf to outsiders and several other sound-muffling esoteric incantations. The portraits of a Wizarding home could always report what they had seen to their masters, and reveal that the minor flaw in the wards had in reality been something far more serious.

Crouch Manor was deadly silent as she climbed the large stairs. It was also looking terribly neglected, despite the visible efforts of the House Elves to project an atmosphere of happiness. Most of the photos and paintings were several decades old and the fashion shown by the decorations and the trinkets was outdated if she wanted to be generous. Some of the heirlooms and banners looked like the possessions Walburga or Cassiopeia loved to surround themselves with.

In a few minutes of investigation, Bellatrix was more convinced than ever that Crouch had stayed at work in a deliberate choice to avoid this Manor. Photos and other memories of his wife were impossible to miss.

“He lives really in the past, doesn’t he?” the Black witch asked in a murmur to a nude wall. “If he wasn’t such an unlikable politician, I would almost feel sorry for him...”

Truthfully, Bellatrix felt Crouch had received exactly what he deserved. The man had been – and for all she knew, still was – devoured by his ambition. It was ambition to become Minister of Magic, ambition to become the lighthouse of their world, and ambition to be recognised as the greatest wizard in Britain above Albus Dumbledore and whatever other challengers there were for the title.

And in definite, Crouch’s ambition had led him to a precipice where he had fallen without a tear of remorse. The title of Minister had escaped him. His wife had died of illness a few months after the war’s end. And she had personally ended the life of his only son weeks ago. Crouch had the reputation of a competent man, but he was humourless and merciless, prompt to strangle everything which stood against his powerbase and the Dark Arts.

“Now let’s see what you have hidden...” The witch opened a tall door in oaken wood to enter a large office. There were four enormous shelves, each leaning against one wall, and all were full with impeccably classified ledgers and large books with leather covers. “Tsss...tsss...the doctrine to hunt practitioners of the Old Ways...fight against the Dark Wizards...someone has kept his bad habits, I see...”

Few non-Death Eaters knew how much the sponsorship of several Noble Houses to the Dark Lord had been granted because Crouch was partisan to erase their entire culture and traditions. If Dumbledore wanted to restrain and limit many ancestral practises, Crouch had always been far more ruthless and cruel, going so far as to train Aurors to attack and imprison communities celebrating Beltane and Samhain.

“ACCIO!” Bellatrix tried the simple solution before searching by hand the ledgers she wanted. For the second time that day, she was pleasantly surprised, as a voluminous black ledger flew from the top of the shelf in front of her and directly into her arms. The red bright letters of the title told her this was the information she needed for her plans.

**EMERGENCY TRIALS OF NOVEMBER 1981**

“I don’t think the Minister and his secretaries will thank you for this monumental error of judgement, Lord Crouch...”

**6 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“The wererats are in my opinion a spent force, Headmaster. The Ministry is of course grossly overestimating the number of warriors they kill each time, but their cells were dispersed in tiny groups of four and five before the Battle of Azkaban and against a dozen Aurors, the skinchangers have no choice but to flee if they don’t want to be massacred.”

“The vampires?”

“As I wrote to you in my last letter, two of our informants have localised between seventy and ninety Shadow Blades in Eastern Transylvania. I went myself to check their findings and I agree the British coven has certainly found refuge there.”

“They will have the opportunity to rebuild their ranks and incite their Transylvanian cousins to open action.”

“I agree Headmaster, but my teams can’t take action in Transylvania. The entire government and the economy are owned by the blood-suckers. Trying to kill Victor Aemillius and failing would be a declaration of war to all Transylvanian covens. It would be...inconvenient.”

“Indeed,” sighed Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. “Leave two agents to keep an eye on them and warn me if there are any signs the vampires intend to return to Britain. Have you managed to discover the whereabouts of Bellatrix Black and James Potter?”

“No, Headmaster,” Remus Lupin shook his head in his scholarly manner which always reminded him of the Gryffindor Prefect instead of the vampire-hunter the man had become. “Despite what the *Daily Prophet* trumpets every day, no wizard or witch has come forward with a credible testimony of them in the British Isles. It’s likely they got out of Britain before the hunts started.”

“I see.”

Remus’ lips contorted in a poor smile.

“The former Azkaban prisoners are not going to be welcomed on the continent like the vampires were in Transylvania, but the foreign equivalents of our Aurors are not in any hurry to arrest them. No Death Eater was seen walking in the streets of Paris, Amsterdam, or Copenhagen, but on the contrary case I’m not sure the Ministries would agree to arrest them and send them back. Nobody is happy we are using Dementors to guard prisoners...”

Albus Dumbledore stayed outwardly calm, but inside he was grimacing a lot. In hindsight, he should have used his popularity right after Grindelwald’s War to close Azkaban and build a far more humane prison in the Isles. But there had been so much to do, and by the end of the fifties, when he had sufficiently solidified his power base, his stance on Azkaban had met obstruction at every level of the Ministry. Azkaban was relatively cheap to operate and maintain, since the Dementors’ income was to prey on the humans and other criminals’ emotions and souls.

“The Dementors have cost us a lot of good will over the last centuries. Those monsters should be banished and destroyed, not kept as prison wardens. I have militated ceaselessly to get rid of them, but the Ministry maintains they only sleep soundly at night because the Dementors are guarding Azkaban.”

The Chief Warlock made a move in the direction of the Forbidden Forest, where undoubtedly at this hour over a hundred of the Dark Creatures were waiting, generating a true cloud of darkness and despair.

“We can’t trust those creatures. We ignore their motivations, and at the slimmest sign of weakness they will not stay loyal.”

But on this point, like on many others, Fudge truly was the successor of Bagnold. The Dementors were obeying the Ministry unquestionably; end of the debate and the story.

Albus sighed again.

“Thank you, Remus. We will have to stay alert and react fast when they make a mistake.”

And they would. With most of the Dark houses in Britain busy distancing themselves from these pariahs, the former prisoners of Azkaban would find little support among their past associates. Potter and Black had the means to access large piles of Galleons, but the moment they began to recruit, the Order would know of it and then a strike force would end their projects of terror.

“On a completely unrelated subject, I was hoping you could help me give a few Patronus lessons to some students in addition to the Tournament selections organised next spring...”

“I will try to find a few hours, Headmaster, but I’m afraid I won’t have much time before mid-November...”

“It will have to do. Thank you, Remus.”

Remus gave a chilli pepper treat to Fawkes and left.

The old wizard listened for several seconds to the noise of footsteps descending the stairs, the stone of the gargoyle moving aside, and finally his sole-and-only loyal werewolf’s steps faded away in the distance.

It was only then he turned his attention to the large mass of paperwork waiting for his signature on his desk. At first glance, it looked two-thirds of it was coming from the Board of Governors. He saw the hand of Lady Narcissa Malfoy behind this new move. The woman was a viper, and unlike her husband, was far too fond of underhanded bureaucratic moves for his taste.

It was the moment an owl chose to arrive at his window. A newspaper was thrown on the Board new demands. This was...unexpected. He had already read the *Daily Prophet* this morning, and a lot of the magazines and foreign newspapers he subscribed to weren’t published on Monday. Maybe this was a mistake...

Albus Dumbledore unfolded the newspaper and read the title.

**THE LOUD DUCK**

**HOGWARTS OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER**

*The newspaper which quacks loudly what Hogwarts whispers*

“Oh Merlin’s beard...” How many years had it been since anyone tried to publish a newspaper at Hogwarts? Seventies, no sixty...sixty-eight, yes, it had to be in 1968, and it had been an ephemeral thing, the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor coalition of journalists managing to publish five different editions before a counter-alliance of Ravenclaws and Slytherins forced him to shut it all down as lawyers began to intervene on both sides.

He looked at the headlines...and winced.

“Maybe they won’t be able to beat the previous record...”

**DEMENTORS BOARD THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS!**

**MINISTRY INVESTIGATION REVEALS EVERYTHING WAS ACCORDING TO THE PLAN!**

**ENGLISH QUIDDITCH TEAM UNABLE TO WIN A SINGLE EXHIBITION MATCH!**

**THE MAGIC OF QUIDDITCH HAS CROSSED THE IRISH SEA!**

**THE TRI-WIZARD TOURNAMENT IS RUMOURED TO BE BACK! HOW MANY DEATHS THIS TIME?**

**MALFOY AND PARKINSON HEIRS ATTACKED BY A FEROCIOUS CRUP!**

**IS THE NOMINATION OF A NEW SUPREME MUGWUMP BAD NEWS FOR BRITAIN?**

**TRELAWNEY STRIKES BACK!**

**THE DEATH PROPHECIES ARE FOR THE BOY-WHO-LIVED AND THE EXILED QUEEN!**

“Note to self: do not introduce these journalist apprentices to Rita Skeeter...”

**7 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The first publication of the *Loud Duck* made Alexandra glad they had decided to stay anonymous. Mere hours after the owls distributed their work to an excited crowd of students, many influential people of the Wizarding society had just happened to coincidentally rush to Hogwarts for the afternoon. They included in no particular order: Lady Narcissa Malfoy, Lord Parkinson, Lady Augusta Longbottom, the new DMLE Director Rufus Scrimgeour, five Aurors and several members of the national English Quidditch staff.

As she had predicted when they were in private, she almost regretted not waiting for one or two days to have even more information and juicy gossip.

Ultimately, the newspaper had been a massive success and Professor Flitwick had received nearly sixty-four subscriptions for the next copy of the newspaper. By unanimous agreement, the Exiled had thus decided to make the *Loud Duck* a bi-monthly work. ‘Brother Chimera’, ‘Lady Lawgiver’, ‘White Grace’, ‘Glassy Glassy’, ‘Red Weather’ and ‘Lady Crow’ had many more stories to commemorate on parchment, and if the Ministry didn’t like what they had to say, well too bad for them. Hogwarts was out of their jurisdiction and nothing in Hogwarts’ charter forbid a newspaper as long as they told the truth and nothing but the truth.

It was a new era of information and liberty! Okay, maybe they were a bit too optimistic. Magical Britain had in theory the concept of press freedom, except the Ministry seemed happy when it owned all the main ways to express your opinion on a large scale.

The discussion she had with Morag and Hermione as they marched out of the Great Hall was completely unrelated to this.

“Yes Morag, I’m telling you, you need to clean up your part of our bedroom. Without your House Elves, your notion of order is far too messy for the taste of your delicate housemates.”

“You’re just saying that because Hermione is venerating order and perfect tidying up to an unhealthy degree.”

“I am not venerating order!”

The Irish pure-blood tried to deliver a hug to the brown-haired Exiled, an attempt which was dodged easily by the latter.

“Dear, you are methodically placing your clothes, your books and even your wand before going to sleep... I think...OUCH! I didn’t say anything Alexandra!”

“You were going to,” the Potter Heiress countered with a virtuous face and a wand in her left hand which had just flashed with a painless hex. “Have you tried the Potions essay Whitehead gave us yesterday?”

“No, and I try very hard not to think about it. This homework on the Fever-Cure is going to take us several hours to complete...”

“I am short of a few inches,” declared Hermione, ever the over-achiever.

“How the hell did you manage to write it so fast?” Alexandra asked with honest surprise. Yesterday she had barely had the time to do the Astronomy exercises on the influence of Mars and the basics of several advanced Mending Charms. When it came to Potions, she barely had the time to write the introduction paragraph...

“Err...I may have read a book or two on it?”

“We will have to be careful,” said Morag in a falsely-worried expression. “Hermione Granger is going to devour the entire library if we don’t watch her...”

The conversation ended, for they had finally arrived at the classroom where Defence Against the Dark Arts was supposed to take place. The door was opened and there was a white-brown placard with ‘WELCOME STUDENTS!’ written on it.

The four third-year Exiled entered silently, curious what the new Professor, Erasmus Rincewind, had decided for his class.

By curse or a succession of misfortunes and accidents stretching the definition of coincidence to its maximum, none of the Senior DADA Professors had managed to hold their posts for more than a year in any student’s living memory. It went without saying that the curriculum was a bit...erratic when you changed the teacher every year.

What was overlooked even more by the adults, was that the Professors changed the classroom to make their mark on DADA. Quirrell had filled his classroom with garlic. Devkins had preferred the bland and uninteresting look. Reed, of course, had been infamous for placing narcissist portraits of Gilderoy Lockhart everywhere. And Lockhart...had been Lockhart.

The new classroom – situated on an unoccupied wing of the third floor – was not in any of these categories.

In fact, it didn’t look like a classroom at all.

To begin with, it was two or three times the size of a normal classroom, the ceiling was far higher than the norm at Hogwarts and it had been painted blue. There were no chairs, no desks, and no black board.

Instead of a wooden or a stone floor, there was a surface of grass. And yes, a rapid ‘Finite Incantatem’ informed her it was true grass, not a high-level glamour or an illusion abusing her senses. Irregularly, there were mini-rocks and replicas of wooden shacks.

The Hufflepuffs who had arrived before them were even more bewildered by this strange meeting place than the Exiled were. Alexandra saw Wayne Hopkins and Leanne Malone whisper ‘unbelievable’ several times.

One by one, the rest of the Ravenclaws arrived, Terry Boot coming last but with two minutes before the agreed hour.

Thirty seconds before the official start of the courses rang in the corridors, Professor Rincewind barged in, breathing like he had just run a long obstacle course. His outfit had not changed much from the one they had seen him wear at the Sorting Feast: the robes were clearly not the same, but they were still a dark shade of red.

“Good morning, students!”

“Good morning, Professor Rincewind.”

“I suggest you leave your bags at the entrance of the classroom,” declared the wizard in good English but with a significant Germanic accent. “Take only your wands. It will be a practical lesson today.”

About half of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs exchanged hesitant expressions. The last practical session of second year had also been the first: Lockhart had released Cornish Pixies before making his cowardly escape. The students had been forced to fight them themselves, because ‘they were only Pixies’. Yes, Lockhart had played his role well. A bit too well in fact: their instruction of DADA had been thoroughly sabotaged and if you were good at the final exams, it was because you self-studied, not because the Professor was competent.

Unlike Potions, Transfiguration or Charms, there was no call for their names. Professor Rincewind just marched to the centre of the room, sat on large rock, and drew a smoking pipe from one of his pockets, though he made no sign to use it, instead inspecting it before returning it to where it had come from.

The Ravens and the Badgers formed little groups facing him. Zacharias Smith tried to sit on the grass, but an imperious sign of the hand promptly forced the Hufflepuff to stand like the rest of the boys and girls.

“Welcome to the third-year class of Defence Against the Dark Arts!” the wizard exclaimed with about one-third of the enthusiasm Lockhart had begun his classes with. “Unless you were living under a rock these last five days, you have to know I am Professor Erasmus Rincewind. If you want my biography or a somewhat coherent amount of my exploits, go to a good library and buy the books detailing the events of the Grindelwald War.”

Alexandra, Hermione, Morag, and Nigel tensed. They had known the name of the man was the same as the Butcher of Dresden, but they had not been able to discover if he was him or one of his children. Well, now they had the answer.

“Now, I have to say I find the very concept of Defence Against the Dark Arts ridiculous,” chuckled their new teacher, forcing gasps and exclamation of stupor. “Don’t look so shocked! For every Dark Curse which ended the life of a wizard or a witch, a non-esoteric spell like the Bombardment Charm is responsible for dozens of injuries and crimes.”

The Professor began to write in letters of flames the name of his course and his name.

“The Dark Arts are by their nature difficult to put boundaries to, like every branch of magic. The Durmstrang curriculum recognises eleven licensed specialties: Blood Magic, Curses, Death Magic, Fel-Ley Magic, Shadow Magic, Dark Rituals, Black Philtres, Mind Magic, Dark Alchemy, Soul Magic, and Necromancy.”

The adult wizard gave them several seconds to assimilate the news before continuing.

“There are two more branches that are not taught at Durmstrang and whose studies are sufficient to send you to a maximum-security prison if you are caught: Time Magic and Summoning.”

A large staff appeared from nowhere in the right hand of the teacher and he slammed the floor loudly, provoking sparkles of magic.

“These are the Dark Arts. Don’t make the mistake of thinking everything in them is nice and pretty. Dark Magic is not nice, it is chaotic and it delights in contradictions. To make matters worse from your point of view, Ministries are in the habit of heavily regulating the teaching and the knowledge of Curses and Rituals. And as Dark Wizards will often be forced to invent their own spells themselves, the Dark Arts are a perpetual nightmare of chaos and change. Just because you have won a fight against a powerful Dark Wizard doesn’t mean a lesser practitioner can’t kill you in one spell before you are able to react. Winning a duel against a wizard is always dependent on two principles: make fewer mistakes than your opponent and adapt to his style faster than he will adapt to yours. If your enemy is a Master of the Dark Arts, the second principle is a question of life and death.”

The speech was delivered in a deadly serious tone. And then Professor Rincewind paused to take a banana from his pocket and began eating it with a large smile on his face.

“I’m told...crunch...your first two years...crunch...of education have been...crunch...less than positive. Which leads me to my first lesson.”

And the banana-eater wrote in fiery green letters with his stick-staff.

**DEFENCE LESSON NUMBER ONE**

**RUNNING AWAY FROM THE DARK WIZARDS**

“Err...Professor?” asked Justin Finch-Fletchey. “Aren’t we supposed to...know how to defend ourselves against Dark Creatures and Dark Wizards?”

“An excellent question, Mr. Finch-Fletchey,” the smile of Professor Rincewind was so large Alexandra knew for sure they weren’t going to like the answer at all. “But the only real Dark Creatures in existence are by definition monsters preying on wizards and the rest of humanity by choice. They include Werewolves, Vampires, Dementors, Lethifolds...and of course Dark Wizards.”

The long staff was slammed against the ground, this time harder and in a more threatening manner.

“Except one student in this class, no one in your third-year class will last more ten seconds against an opponent of this calibre and it would be laughable to pretend to the contrary.”

The Senior DADA Professor began to use his ridiculous hat like a fan.

“We are just supposed to fight boggarts, not vampires!” protested Zacharias Smith.

It was apparently the wrong thing to say as the Professor erupted.

“Do you know what a Boggart is, idiot boy? It is a manifestation of your worst fears and nightmares. Fought with two persons or more, defeating it is easier than bowing before a Hippogriff! Alone, the difficulty is close to the mental effort required to shield yourself with a mist-Patronus! Five points from Hufflepuff for your unreasoned interruption!”

Alexandra saw Megan and Susan drag Zacharias back in the crowd, before he embarrassed the honour of the Badgers further.

“I am unfortunately a bit short on Dark Wizards for this lesson,” remarked the red-robed wizard. “We are going to use Mimics instead. Who can tell me what Mimics are? Yes, Miss Granger!”

“Mimics are creatures disguising themselves as chests full of treasures. They are known to be used by Dark Wizards to protect their treasures, as the Mimics provide false replicas of gold and money...”

“Very good, very good,” and the stick-staff was slammed a last time, shattering the illusion and revealing that Rincewind had not been sitting on a rock...but on a large chest. Well it was also the weirdest chest they had ever seen: it had a lot of legs, small teeth, and a lengthy tongue.

“Your goal is to escape this classroom before the Dark Wizard perched on a Mimic kills you! GO!”

What followed could not be described as anything but a massacre. The Hufflepuffs and most of the Ravenclaws ran towards the door, only to realise there was a combination of wards protecting and locking it. All the while the ‘rocks’ of the room were revealed to be other Mimics. Zacharias Smith, Roger Malone, and Michael Corner began to shout how unfair it was, until a Mimic sent them rolling apart.

“BWAHAHAHAHA!” laughed their teacher on his pet monster. “Is this the best Hogwarts can do to oppose me today?”

“Morag, defensive formation! VERDIMILLIOUS TRIA!”

Her tornado-like Jinx struck the Mimic right in the maw and sent it against the wall out of the game, but Rincewind with an unnatural movement of gymnastics had already jumped onto another Mimic and placed himself out of range.

The fight became more and more unequal as the Mimics knocked out the Hufflepuffs with incredible facility all around the room. Their tongues were like whip strikes and seemed to hit in innovative and humiliating ways. The Badgers boys and girls answered with low-level hexes, Expelliarmus, and the like, and the spells didn’t even slow down the chest-like creatures.

Alexandra would have loved to say the Ravenclaws were doing better...but when Michael Corner was on his knees begging for the Mimic not to eat him and Lisa Turpin was pursued by an enthusiastic chest while screaming for help...

In less than two minutes, the surviving students were reduced to Susan Bones and the four Exiled. They were also surrounded by numerous Mimics, and the rest of the class was bound, stunned, or neutralised in various ridiculous methods. Six Mimics had been damaged and sent packing, one by Susan, one by Morag, one by Hermione, and three by Alexandra, but that left ten.

“Is it too late to admit our defeat?”

“BWAHAHAHA! Victory goes to the Dark Wizard!”

The Exiled turned their attention to Professor Rincewind...only the veteran of the Grindelwald war was not there: a massive orang-utan was eating a banana on top of the Mimic next to the door.

“Morag, I fear Hogwarts is getting weirder day after day...”

“You too?”

**10 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Turn around, sit on this chair, and sing *God save the Queen*.”

Alexandra couldn’t maintain a calm facade as Ginny Weasley did exactly that. She was well aware the grimace on her visage had to be ugly.

“Okay, that’s enough, you can stop singing.” The Potter Heiress took one of the empty seats of the abandoned classroom. “Morag?”

“I don’t know...it is like the Imperius, but...”

“She has none of the symptoms,” agreed Nigel, which had his wand examining the violet eyes of ‘Scylla Yaxley’.

“Legilimency?” Hermione tried.

“Too complicated,” Fred Weasley replied. “And there are no feelings or emotional trigger. Besides, if it was Legilimency, Ginny wouldn’t have reacted when she was stunned.”

And that was the problem, wasn’t it? When Ginny had relayed the words of the Queen, Alexandra thought it was a poor choice of words. ‘Go back to England and serve Alexandra Potter’ had seemed so innocent in the Hogwarts Express compared to the news after that.

Now it was just frightening. Whether asleep or stunned, Ginny was obeying her orders to the letter as long as she was able to hear her voice. ‘Serve’ had taken a far darker and sinister connotation. And neither the Twins nor the Exiled had any idea how it had been done.

“It isn’t the gloves,” Morag confirmed after more and more tests came back negative. “It ‘only’ cloaks her in a NEWT-level illusion which can’t be easily dispelled. It has no additional features. There was no magical activation when you gave an order, Alex.”

“Fantastic, truly fantastic,” the green-eyed witch whispered.

The Wizarding World had a lot of methods to force recalcitrant people to obey powerful witches and wizards. In fact, there were far too many for Alexandra’s tastes and peace of mind. At the top of the list was of course the Imperius, one of the three Unforgivable Curses. But there were other methods. Occlumency had after all only a reason to exist because there were Legilimens wizards in the wild. Obliviators supposed to erase the breaches of the Statute of Secrecy were deviations of the spell Obliviate, which erased the memories of the target. There were Compulsions. There were Oaths, though those could not be sworn under duress. There were Love Potions and other artifices capable of altering your thoughts.

But as far as the people gathered in this abandoned classroom knew, there were no magical short-cut to force a witch to obey another witch and keep it running for an unlimited period of time. The Imperius gave total control to the caster over its victims, but it was fortunately far from perfect. The Imperius didn’t work on certain people at all, and the longer it lasted, the stronger the person began to resist the influence of this abominable Curse. During the civil war, Death Eaters had needed to be near their ‘puppets’ at frequent intervals just in case the effects of the Imperius dissipated.

By all accounts, the Queen of the Exchequer had thought all these problems didn’t apply to her. It raised in turn very unpleasant possibilities. If they had done it to Ginny Weasley to show their skills and scare them, how many people had been enslaved the same way? Non-magical people were sadly less resistant than a twelve-year-old witch.

“I don’t see any way to break whatever enchantment or curse the Exchequer Queen has placed on her,” admitted Alexandra, putting her wand in her holster. “For now, the only solution I see is to avoid giving anything looking like orders to your sister.”

The Weasley Twins were clearly unhappy, but nodded in agreement.

“Do you have other ideas how it was done?” asked George, unless it was Fred. When they were in Hogwarts uniforms, the Twins were nearly impossible to distinguish.

“I have some,” she had read a lot of history books in three years and some had been...interesting, in a morbid way. “Imperial Rome developed magical brands to ensure their slaves weren’t able to revolt. It’s entirely possible the Exchequer imagined a new one and found a way to keep it invisible no matter the wards and detection spells encountered.”

Yeah, the ancient wizards had wielded tremendous powers, but morality had often been thrown away to die in isolation. One of the meagre consolations Alexandra had found reading these history books had been said Arts had been lost a long time ago...

“It would at least solve the mystery of how in a few minutes this Queen was able to do so many things. The brand would have been prepared elsewhere; she just needed a few seconds to use it.”

“In this case, they would have taken inspiration from the Dark Mark...”

“Or Voldemort...oh stop flinching, it’s just a name! Fine, the Dark Lord has taken inspiration from them.” Alexandra was frankly annoyed by the constant fear the British wizards showed when the war-name of Riddle was uttered. Grindelwald had been worse. The Exchequer was by all accounts worse. Voldemort had failed to overthrow the Ministry in several years of open warfare, and when you saw what people like Fudge did on their own, it was not proof of competent opposition. And then he had lost by trying to kill a baby.

Voldemort’s name should be a symbol of mediocrity and failure. He was not and never would after Samhain 1981 be considered a successful Dark Lord.

“We have no way to know,” concluded soberly Hermione.

“We have no way to know,” repeated Alexandra. “Ginny, you can stand and go wherever you want. Your brothers and I have something to discuss.”

As Hermione left in a hurry for the library and Luna went with Nigel, the classroom emptied quickly leaving Morag, the Weasley Twins and she to discuss the future of the prank business.

“Okay, now that the dark problems are dealt with, impress us, oh pranksters.”

And for a good hour, the Twin Terrors of Gryffindor did exactly that. First were the fireworks and Alexandra honestly had no idea Fred and George had been able to create so many different types. The simpler ones exploded in brilliant messages; the more complicated were like big missiles tracking a specific target and unleashing a multitude of pranks on its way. Needless to say, only the smaller ones were tested here; it was better to not attract the attention of Filch and other Hogwarts authorities.

The second item to be presented was the Weasley-customised versions of items already sold by Zonko’s. Things like Fanged Frisbees, Dungbombs, and the like. In general, Alexandra had to say she preferred the Weasley product. Their Fanged Frisbees, for example, were covered in inoffensive teeth, but instead of the sharpness, they had used a modified glue which made sure that after a bad reception, the Frisbee was going to stay in your hand for several minutes whether you wanted it to or not. The Dungbombs had a special air-freshener sold separately to remove the bad odour. Included in this category were also fake hairs and moustaches, giving you an older or more ridiculous appearance.

Third were the totally new creations like the fake wands, the ‘bottle’ pranks like a mini wind storm they had called ‘Weather called in a bottle’, the Sunny Spells, or more surprising Unbreakable Eggs. According to Fred – assuming it was Fred – the experiences of their Father had given them some ‘Muggle ideas’.

Fourth were the ideas George and Fred felt confident would work but that they had temporarily put on the backburner as they lacked the money. And there were a lot of them. Some weren’t exactly eye-catching like the ‘Broom Broom kit’, but the majority had potential....assuming they lived to their promises. ‘Shield Hats’ had applications outside the domain of pranks, as did ‘Decoy Detonators’. And the ‘Canary Cream’, promised to be a great achievement of Transfiguration if they stabilised it in a safe sweet.

During this, Morag and she took notes, but they kept things deliberately vague and in cipher. Between the Golden Trio and the other pranksters at Hogwarts, it was best not to let outsiders know what was at stake.

“I think you have a good range of products to make a shop,” the Potter Heiress noted. “Morag?”

“I agree. You can set up a meeting at Hogsmeade for...when is the first week-end we’re authorised to leave the castle, by the way?”

“According to good old Professor Flitwick, it will certainly be the 26th of September,” Fred said while making a calendar which had seen better days appear from nowhere.

“Traditionally, the Hogsmeade week-ends are always at the end of each month,” George spoke with a thoughtful expression. “The second week-end we’re authorised to leave the castle is traditionally for Halloween.”

“That should do,” Alexandra said after seeing Morag had no objections. “Lady Zabini has apparently found an acceptable lawyer and will wait for us in front of Tomes and Scrolls.”

“That leaves us the question of ownership and money.”

Alexandra knew the Weasley Twins still had their trickster faces on, but they were tense. Gryffindors were not Ravenclaws or Slytherins: their emotions were most of the time available for every witch or wizard with the slightest observational skills.

“I will invest two thousand and five hundred Galleons in your joke shop. In exchange though, I want forty percent of the business.”

“I didn’t know Ravenclaws were so harsh in affairs,” replied Fred.

Alexandra simply shrugged in return.

“I am ready to accept a period of no-benefits for the first two years...I suppose you will open the shop the moment you’re legal adults?” Seeing them nod in approval, she continued. “Yes, I am willing to accept I will not see a Sickle added to my vaults for the first two years and I will not demand interest rates for the unofficial loan I am going to give you. But I am still taking a big risk with you, Fred, George.”

“In fact, it’s George and Fred.”

“I don’t care,” the Basilisk-Slayer stuck her tongue out at the pranksters. “My point stands.”

The Twins communicated a lot by signs for two minutes before reengaging the conversation.

“We would prefer giving you a bit less ownership, like thirty-three, thirty-five percent, and we agree by contract to give you a minimum fraction of our benefits...and we will never sell the shop without your agreement.”

“Thirty-nine.”

“Thirty-five.”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Thirty-seven.”

“Okay, transaction done for thirty-seven...”Alexandra finally agreed after a stand-off the cow-boys of the Far West would have cheerfully applauded.

“As for the restrictions, I have none for the moment...though I would prefer if you stay far away from the business of Love Potions in the future.”

“Strange, in general it’s girls who are begging for those...but we obey, oh most dangerous and cruel Dark Lady,” Fred said with a large curtsy which was as insincere as it was humanly possible to be.

“See you at Hogsmeade, generous Dark Lady!”

And the Twins detonated the rest of the fireworks in the corridor, forcing the two Ravenclaw girls to take their bags and run elsewhere before the caretaker or another Professor put them in detention.

**12 September 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

To discover your inner animal, what was needed above all else was a good pillow.

No, it was not a prank by the Weasley Twins. And yes, Alexandra was perfectly serious.

In fact, the pillow was best accompanied by a soft mattress. The Potion one had to drink to discover his or her Animagus form placed you in a magical trance for a duration varying from a couple of minutes to three hours. All the Exiled had decided by unanimous vote it was out of question to stay on a chair or held by the others. With the mattress and the pillow located on the floor of their study room, you could hardly fall hard and injure yourself.

There had been a lot of debate about who was going to start. Ultimately, Nigel and Hermione had cold feet, Luna was absent – something about Quibbler and nargles – and Lyre was needed as a watcher because the large book of instructions was in French. By elimination process and motivation power, Morag was going through the experiment first. Then it would be her turn. Assuming they had enough time. They technically had all of Sunday afternoon, but Alexandra had discovered that a lot of plans she made never failed to meet big obstacles on the way.

For such an impressive ability, this first step was completely unimpressive. Morag drank the silver-coloured Potion and slumped onto the mattress unconscious, the last thing on her lips a very vulgar Gaelic insult.

“Good, it works,” said Lyre in a satisfied tone after casting the two verification spells of the Animagus book explaining the Bayard-De Lain method.

“Well, we would have been a bit angry if it hadn’t,” green eyes met blue ones levelly. “I won’t say this Potion is the Elixir of Life, but we bought six doses and the final price was close to one hundred Galleons.”

To become an Animagus, you needed both skill and money. For the Exiled, it had been no problem: between Lyre, Morag, and Alexandra, they had easily gathered the funds – each witch finding thirty-three Galleons on their own was not a problem for Heiresses of ancient Houses. But Alexandra rather doubted any Muggle-born would be able to justify this expense. Moreover, since what they were doing was greatly stretching what was legal or what was not, it was best to avoid British suppliers of the Potion.

“There will be other steps which will probably be more expensive if we go ahead with the Animagus transformation.”

“I know,” Alexandra watched Morag’s smiling face, unaware of what was happening close to her. This part of the French Animagus method was not for lone individuals. You needed someone you could trust to play the role of sentinel. “If we are able to become Animagi together, we will have to register in France, Venice, Illyria, or Greece...”

These were the countries with less stringent laws where Animagi were involved. All you needed to do was a private session with a panel of Ministry appointees demonstrating you had mastered you animal form, and a relatively small gold sum to buy the licence. The details of your Animagus form were sealed away from the public and were not disclosed to anyone save if you were arrested and judged by the authorities of said country or by the ICW for the crimes of high treason, Alpha-level Beach of the Statute of Secrecy, or mass murder atrocities.

It went without saying that London had less pleasant regulations for the Animagi declared on its soil. To sum-up, you were questioned for an entire month by Transfiguration ‘experts’, the Ministry demanded and obtained every little detail about your Animagus form – from the size of your eyes to the speed of growth of your fur. You had to swear several Oaths. You had to wear restraining manacles when you were in Ministry areas of high-level security. You had to sign papers which told you that the Ministry could conscript you in the DMLE when a state of war was voted by the Wizengamot. And of course, the usual Ministry imbecility was to publish the list of people being Animagi. Any assassin or Dark Wizard wanting to kill you knew your trump card. And you or your House had to pay a far greater sum to have the same license.

There were many more imbecilities to agree to, but basically that was it. Becoming an Animagi in Britain and registering defeated over ninety-nine percent of the purpose to transform into one in the first place. Little wonder then, that the Animagi list Hermione had found thanks to Professor Flitwick in an obscure section of the library held only seven names.

Yes, seven names for a period going from 1900 to 1993. And yes, Professor McGonagall was on it.

Now, Alexandra had not made deep studies into it, but she had seen Peter Pettigrew transform into a rat. And a few days ago, Professor Rincewind had revealed himself to be an orang-utan Animagus. Given these clues, it was likely there were dozens of people in Britain who were Animagus but had never bothered informing the Ministry.

Alexandra didn’t blame them.

“I think I will do it in France, if you don’t mind,” murmured Lyre as Hermione was busy reciting a new Potions essay like her life depended on it. “I will have less parchment forms to fill that way.”

“It’s your choice,” they may be together in this, but Alexandra was not going to beat the rest of the Exiled with a stick to register in a single place. “What has been happening in the Snake’s Den these last days? Malfoy has been staying awfully shy and quiet lately...”

“Well I don’t know what his mother told him the afternoon we published the *Loud Duck*, but I have the impression it put the very fear of the Dark Powers in him. The same is true of Parkinson, though it was her father who gave the lesson. And no, I don’t know what was said. I am Draco’s cousin, but this altercation was done very privately.”

“Well, better late than never,” the Basilisk-Slayer spoke. “Though if he had begun the year with that disposition, he may not have lost all his support save Crabbe and Goyle...”

“A fact Nott has abundantly commented upon,” both girls grimaced at the same time. Draco Malfoy had stopped antagonising the Gryffindors and the Golden Trio, but Theodore Nott was looking like he was going to fill the empty shoes of his predecessor. The pure-blood boy had almost no third-years under his banner, but there were many second and fourth-years following him. “House Nott has not the prestige and the influence Lord and Lady Malfoy are commanding, fortunately. Besides, Daphne Greengrass has Zabini, Davis and Bulstrode. With the Carrows more or less neutral, you can consider Slytherin House...stable for the time being. Oh, I was about to forget. Tracey Davis is the new Seeker of the Slytherin Quidditch Team.”

Alexandra snickered. The Slytherin Quidditch Team had in the last years been somewhat infamous for selecting brutes with muscles and not much else. To select a girl, Marcus Flint must be really desperate...that or the Malfoy case had convinced him to privilege talent over nepotism.

“She can’t do worse than Mr. ‘I bought my position with seven imperfect Nimbus 2001’, no?”

“That goes without saying. Ready for your French lesson?”

“Yes,” Alexandra groaned, praying Morag was going to wake up soon. Why was French so complicated? Gaelic had been a breeze compared to the treacherous grammar and vocabulary employed by the inhabitants on the other side of Channel...

“Good, repeat after me: *Benjamin n’est pas dans sa chambre*.”

The language-torture went for over forty-six minutes before Morag began to cough, cough and finally open her eyes.

“That...wasn’t...enjoyable,” cawed the MacDougal Heiress as she tried and failed to stand from the mattress.

“I sincerely hope for you your animal isn’t a toad,” Alexandra laconically spoke while handing her friend a flask of orange juice that Mora emptied in one gulp.

“Very funny, Alex. Very mature too. No, my animal isn’t a toad.”

“Well don’t keep us waiting.” Hermione and Nigel had abandoned their homework to join them. “It worked?”

“It worked. My Animagus form is a tiger.”

Alexandra whistled in appreciation. She wasn’t aware of the drawbacks going with this animal, but at least her friend had gained something with speed, strength, and the ability to defend itself without returning to human form.

“We will have to search for the exact subspecies...” declared Hermione.

“It was big, had an orange-black shade,” answered Morag as she emptied a second flask, “and for some reason I had to wrestle it. It wasn’t funny at all. You have seen the fangs and the claws of tigers up close?”

This was obviously a rhetorical question and no one felt answering positively was going to calm the Irish pure-blood.

“See it from the good side,” Nigel smiled and tried to put some distance between Morag and himself. “This Animagus form and your hair go very well together....”

“Run!” snarled Morag.

Nigel ran.

“You feel like trying the Potion too, Alex?” Lyre regarded her with a very stone-cold Slytherin face. Alexandra looked at her watch before sighing. There were about roughly three hours before dinner, so it should be manageable.

“Let’s get away with it,” she grumbled before laying down on the mattress.

“Such enthusiasm...”

The Animagus-revealing Potion was not unpleasant to drink, but still rather unsettling. It had the taste of cherry...that is if cherry could be boiling hot one moment and ice-cold the next. She wasn’t able to say when her eyes closed, but when she opened them again, she was not in a study room for sure.

The room was a sort of courtroom, like the one where her guardianship had been decided at the Ministry. The decor and the ambiance were different. The room was badly lit. There were no candles, no torches, never mind electricity.

By all rights, she shouldn’t have been able to see anything, but by an artifice the room looked to be in a sort of penumbra cloud. There were broken seats that she had to walk around.

There appeared to be no logic to this room. One moment she descended stairs, the next seconds she climbed others and the centre of the room was appeared to be far away. Time didn’t seem to exist and after three or four similar atmospheres of desolation and destruction, Alexandra had the bad impression she had returned to her starting point.

Whatever place she was in, her wand had not followed, but when had things like that stopped her? The third-year Ravenclaw raised her right hand and cast the basic spell to banish the shadows.

“LUMOS!”

In an instant, the darkness dissipated...and Alexandra regretted it. Oh yes, she regretted it.

At the centre of the courtroom, there was a platform. And on this platform, that she was only forty or fifty feet away from, there was an archway. And between the antique pillars of stone, pulsed a powerful veil of green energy. She was still too far away to gaze into it like a mirror, but Alexandra could see the crows and the other carrion birds on the other side of this barrier.

Alexandra felt true fear for the first time in months.

“The Veil of the Ancients...” A magical artefact thought to precede Celtic culture on the British Isles. In fact, there had been ancient texts hinting this archway predated humanity’s existence. Period. Magical research in the depths of Ministry had, according to the rumours, created copies, but Alexandra knew with an absolute certainty she wasn’t in front of one of those fakes.

There was only one entity which could have brought her here.

“Lady Morrigan, please listen to the words of your Champion...”

A rumble echoed loudly and Alexandra was ashamed to admit she jumped in fright.

The Archway was not on a platform. It was just guarded by an animal.

“Oh by the One Ring...for the last hour I climbed on its body?”

For an instant Alexandra had the sinking feeling the animal facing her was a Basilisk.

But the impression was rapidly broken. She had seen the Basilisks, killed them, contemplated their corpses and sold their carcasses. The beasts of Salazar Slytherin were pure monsters, their scales were an ugly green and they were fangs and spikes, and gave off an aura of terror and death.

The great snake which opened its livid green eyes was no Basilisk. It was more like someone had cast a Growing Charm on an already huge cobra. The scales were superb, a mosaic of obsidian and gold.

Alexandra hadn’t the slightest idea what species the snake was...she just hoped she did not have to wrestle it. The snake was so big it looked like its head alone could swallow her without much effort.

“So it is my inner animal, uh...” The great snake hissed violently and suddenly there were more eyes opening closer to the archway.

“Oh, I hate my luck...” she whispered. Darkness ceased completely and as sparkles of lightning burst into existence and crows left the Archway of the Ancients, Alexandra knew that she would not need Hermione’s help to discover her Animagus form.

Before her, nine great heads of snake were awoken, each looking at her with the same livid green shade in their reptilian eyes. The claws were bigger than her arms and her legs, and tore apart the seats and the rock with an incredible facility.

“I knew the Powers could give their Champions magical animals to transform into, but this may be a bit overboard...”

Alexandra watched the dangerous mythical opponent she was now presented with.

Nine heads, including three with the ability to breath thunder and the six remaining had various poisons, all of them lethal. The black-yellow scales were impenetrable, to the point wizards had long abandoned the idea of direct battle against them. Their fangs were nearly as long as those of a Basilisk.

It was one of the rare creatures to be in the legendary XXXXXX class and the only predator of the Chimera and the Manticore.

Lernaean Hydra.

“I suppose you are going to make this easy, are you?”

Three columns of lightning embraced the air, a promise of death and challenge in one.

“Thought so,” Alexandra laughed. It wasn’t funny, but the chuckle was something she badly needed. Winning against a XXXXX-class Basilisk was nothing compared to this new challenge. “Let’s see if I can beat the odds once more against nine heads...”