The Doors of Beauxbatons

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1281.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	Femslash (F/F), Hetero (F/M)
Fandom:	Harry Potter - All Media Types
Relationships:	Severus Snape/Original Character, Draco Malfoy/Original Character
Characters:	Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy, Olympe Maxime, Angelique Blanche, Loreen Blanche, Claire Blanche, Owen Diggory, Milena Vuković, Benedikt von Veltheim, Solange Hardi, Hye-jin Moreau
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Modified Canon, Snape Lives, Triwizard Tournament, Banter, Beauxbatons, Draco MalfoyxOC, Severus SnapexOC, FemaleOC, Slowburn, Friendstolovers, Mystery, Romance
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-11-05 Updated: 2026-11-09 Words: 8,912 Chapters: 4/35

The Doors of Beauxbatons

by AnnaVesper

Summary

When Beauxbatons hosts the first Triwizard Tournament since the end of the war, the Blanche sisters have different reasons for following the competition.
Loreen wants to win on home ground. Claire reunites with Draco Malfoy after years apart. Angelique must welcome the visiting delegations, including Severus Snape, whose company soon becomes more complicated than a professional obligation. In the arenas, Lory competes for victory against Owen Diggory, who tries to anticipate every challenge, and Milena Vuković, determined to prove she belongs. Outside them, shared classes, music, and conversations around the table begin to bring together students who arrived as rivals.
Then forgotten corridors reappear. Doors open onto places that shouldn't exist anymore. An unknown presence seeks recognition within the school, and those charged with protecting it must decide whom to trust and what they are willing to allow. Amid rivalries, family secrets, and romances that refuse to follow the tournament schedule, life at Beauxbatons goes on. There are letters to write, assignments to finish, and people whose company no one expected to crave.
Some victories fit inside a cup. Others begin when someone makes room at the table.

Notes

A canon-divergent alternate universe in which Severus Snape survives the war.

Chapter 1: Poison and Punctuality



Severus Snape was irritated.

This, in itself, was hardly worth mentioning. Severus had spent much of his life irritated by one thing or another: incompetent students, excessively cheerful colleagues, ministers far too pleased with themselves. On that sweltering June afternoon, however, his irritation had acquired the precision of a freshly sharpened blade.

The clock above the fireplace read seventeen minutes past three. The representative from Beauxbatons was late. Severus glanced at the clock for the tenth time, as though the sheer force of his contempt might compel its hands to turn backwards. It did not. One of Dumbledore's old instruments released a cloud of greenish smoke in the corner of the room, Phineas Nigellus snored in his portrait, and sunlight streamed through the office windows with offensive persistence.

The first Triwizard Tournament since the end of the war. The grand celebration of European peace. A historic opportunity to bring young witches and wizards together in the spirit of cooperation, courage and friendship — phrases that appeared so frequently in documents from the British Ministry of Magic that Severus had begun to suspect they were some form of veiled threat. The last tournament had ended with a dead student and Voldemort's return. Evidently, the solution devised by the wizarding governments had been to organise another.

Beauxbatons' confirmation had not named its representative. Severus was expecting Madame Maxime.

At twenty-two minutes past three, someone knocked at the door.

"Enter."

The word emerged with enough force to intimidate students through three walls. The door opened nevertheless. The sound of heels crossed the office before Severus had a proper look at his visitor. It was not Madame Maxime.

The woman who entered appeared to be in her thirties and possessed the irritating self-assurance of someone who had never considered the possibility of being unwelcome. She wore pale-blue travelling robes, fitted at the waist and fastened up to the neck, although the light fabric betrayed the heat outside. Her very fair hair was gathered into a low bun, with a few loose strands at her temples. She removed her gloves slowly as she surveyed the office.

Her eyes were a vivid blue. They settled first on the peculiar instruments Dumbledore had left behind, then on the potion bottles lining the shelves, and finally on Severus.

"Monsieur Snape, I presume."

Her French accent was subtle. Her voice less so.

Severus remained behind his desk.

"So it says on the door. And you would be…?"

One of her eyebrows rose.

"Angelique Blanche. Deputy Headmistress of Beauxbatons." She approached and offered him her hand without smiling.

Severus looked at her outstretched hand before accepting it.

The handshake lasted no longer than courtesy required. Angelique withdrew her hand.

"I was expecting Madame Maxime."

"She is not well enough to travel. She asked me to represent her."

Severus gestured towards the chair opposite his desk.

"Do sit down, Mademoiselle Blanche."

"Thank you."

Angelique did not sit immediately. She walked to one of the shelves and tilted her head to examine a container in which a dark substance pulsed like a tiny heart.

"Quite a peculiar office."

"Since Dumbledore's death, I have been trying to make it habitable."

"And you decided to start by adding things that breathe inside jars?"

"They seldom sing. That alone is a considerable improvement."

She turned towards him. The beginnings of a smile appeared on her lips, only to vanish before it could fully form. At last, she settled into the chair and took a folder from her bag.

"These are Beauxbatons' plans for the Tournament. Timetables, accommodation, security protocols, transport, and everything else the English typically require before accepting a cup of tea."

"Rules and organisation have never done anyone any harm."

"A very English belief."

"And is punctuality still a discovery the French hope to make one day?"

"I arrived on time."

Severus pointed towards the clock.

"Twenty-seven minutes late."

"The meeting was scheduled for half past three."

He opened a drawer, retrieved the parchment he had received from Beauxbatons and found the relevant line. Half past three.

Severus folded the letter with great deliberation.

"An unnecessary flourish in the handwriting might account for the misunderstanding."

"Naturally. Blame the French and their handwriting. Never your own eyes."

She offered him the folder. As Severus took it, their fingertips brushed once more.

He noticed. Annoyed with himself for it, he tightened his grip on the folder, searching her face for any reaction.

Angelique, too, remained still for a moment. Her eyes dropped to their hands.

"Is there a problem?" Severus asked.

"None."

She released the folder.

Severus decided to check the documents later for concealed enchantments. It was a more useful precaution than dwelling on the contact.

"I imagine your compatriots possess qualities that compensate for their lack of organisation," he said.

"Several."

"Punctuality is not among them."

"Washing their hair is."

The silence that followed seemed to affect even the portraits.

Severus closed the folder.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Asphodel residue," she explained, pointing to a lock of hair near his face. "And something oily. Wormwood, perhaps. Were you brewing potions before our meeting?"

The accuracy of her observation only made the insult worse.

"My appearance has never compromised my competence."

Her blue eyes travelled slowly over his face. She showed none of the amusement Severus had expected.

"No," Angelique agreed. "I suppose it hasn't."

Severus opened the folder before she could explain what she meant. He had no interest whatsoever in the answer.

He began examining the documents.

"Will the outer wards be extended?"

"They already have been. We've added three independent circles, each connected to a different source. If one fails, the other two remain active."

"And the champions' seals?"

"Individual, tamper-proof, and bound to the designated authorities of all three schools."

"'Tamper-proof' is a dangerous word."

"Which is why I've included an entire section explaining every possible way they could be tampered with."

Severus looked up at her again.

Angelique appeared perfectly at ease, but the amusement had left her eyes. She indicated the correct page without consulting the contents.

He read quickly. The plan was meticulous. It included redundancies, emergency protocols and specific safeguards against Confundus Charms, identity forgery and external interference with the selection process.

"You look disappointed," she said.

"Surprised."

"Because I'm French, or because I'm wearing a skirt?"

"Because you spent the first ten minutes discussing my hair."

"And yet I know precisely what's written on every page."

Severus closed the folder for the second time.

"At the last Tournament, every supposed safeguard was circumvented."

"An impostor remained at Hogwarts for an entire year…"

"I was there."

Angelique held his gaze. Then she leant slightly across the desk.

"I know, *Monsieur* Snape. That is why I want your assessment."

Severus reopened the folder.

"Then show me what you intend to do differently."

"Beauxbatons will not allow a fourth champion to be added. We will not allow the seals to be replaced. And we will not allow any headmaster to withhold information from the other two, however inconvenient the truth may be."

"Are you implying something?"

"I am informing you of the conditions under which we agreed to host the Tournament."

"Hogwarts does not take orders from Beauxbatons."

"Excellent. Then you will understand perfectly when Beauxbatons refuses to take yours."

The beginnings of a smile returned to her lips.

Severus realised the argument should have exhausted his patience by now.

It hadn't.

He pushed Hogwarts' memorandum towards her with rather more force than necessary. The document landed on the desk with a heavy thud.

"These are our requirements."

Angelique regarded the hundred and twelve pages.

"Did you write all of this?"

"Personally."

"And here I was thinking you had no hobbies."

She picked up the document and began leafing through it.

Severus waited for a complaint. Instead, Angelique scanned the first page, then the second and third, with astonishing speed.

"Articles seven and nine contradict each other," she said. "You require unrestricted access for delegation supervisors to the competitors' areas, yet prohibit unauthorised adults from entering the accommodation."

"The headmasters will be authorised."

"That isn't specified in the text."

"It's implied."

"Implicit rules are merely future arguments dressed in formal attire."

Severus held out his hand.

"Give me that."

She moved the memorandum beyond his reach.

"I haven't finished."

"I intend to correct the wording."

"Once I've discovered how many other errors there are."

"There are no other errors."

"What delightful confidence."

Angelique continued reading. A faint line appeared between her eyebrows as she concentrated.

So it wasn't a lack of preparation, then. Within minutes, she had identified issues that two representatives of the British Ministry had missed over several weeks.

Severus ought to have felt reassured.

Instead, he began to regard her as even more dangerous.

"The clause concerning surprise inspections is unacceptable," she said.

"It is essential."

"It allows Hogwarts staff to enter any area of Beauxbatons."

"Only during the Tournament."

"Then I assume you won't object if I include an equivalent authorisation for us to inspect Hogwarts."

"That would be unnecessary."

"Because English castles are incapable of concealing dangers?"

Before Severus could respond, three firm knocks sounded at the door.

Angelique glanced at the small watch on her wrist.

"Now we really are late."

The door opened.

The man who entered was tall and looked to be in his forties. His wavy brown hair was beginning to turn silver at the temples. A close-cropped beard followed the line of his jaw. When he smiled, fine lines deepened at the corners of his eyes. He wore dark red beneath a heavy travelling cloak, and his face bore the serene expression of someone who knew he would be welcome anywhere.

"Forgive me," he said in impeccable English. "The staircases at Hogwarts seem to harbour a particular hostility towards foreigners."

Angelique placed the open memorandum on the desk and stood.

This time, her smile appeared in full.

"Benedikt."

The newcomer crossed the office, took her hand and bent to kiss it. The gesture was formal. The familiarity in his eyes was not.

"Angelique. Still arriving before me simply so you can complain."

"Someone has to preserve tradition."

Benedikt von Veltheim, Headmaster of Durmstrang, turned to Severus.

"Headmaster Snape. We meet at last."

Severus shook the offered hand.

"Headmaster von Veltheim."

Benedikt sat beside Angelique. She handed him a copy of the documents, and the two exchanged a few quick words in French.

Severus waited for them to finish. When Angelique added another remark, he cleared his throat and drew the memorandum to the centre of the desk.

"The inspections clause remains unresolved."

Benedikt opened the folder.

"What is the difficulty?"

"Hogwarts requires access to areas of Beauxbatons," Angelique replied. "I asked whether the authorisation would be reciprocal."

Severus removed the lid from the inkwell.

"It will be. We need to define which areas may be inspected and who may carry out the inspections."

Benedikt drew his chair closer to the desk.

"On the same terms for all three schools."

"Obviously."

Angelique turned the page and pointed to the relevant paragraph. Severus followed the line with his quill.

At least the objections would be made in English from now on.



Chapter 2: Sweets and Other Indiscretions



Beauxbatons was offensively beautiful.

Severus reached this conclusion before he had even crossed the entrance hall. The palace looked as though someone incapable of choosing between architecture and ostentation had built it: pale columns reflected the afternoon light, enchanted fountains sent silver water cascading over the gardens, and tall windows let sunlight flood entire corridors. Hogwarts at least had the decency to conceal its excesses beneath centuries of soot.

A young woman in blue robes escorted Severus to the Deputy Headmistress's office and announced his arrival. Before she could finish, a voice answered from the other side of the door:

"If he's in a foul mood, make him wait five minutes."

Severus opened the door.

"Too late."

Angelique Blanche sat behind a desk covered in parchment. Her fair hair fell loose over one shoulder, and the sleeves of her robes had been rolled up to her elbows. She showed no embarrassment at having been overheard.

"Monsieur Snape. What a delightful intrusion."

"I sent three owls informing you of my arrival time."

"I received all three."

"And yet you instructed your employee to leave me standing in the corridor."

"Only if you were in a foul mood. I see she should have obeyed."

The young woman by the door bit her lip to suppress a smile. Severus gave her a look, and she disappeared down the corridor. Angelique gestured towards the chair opposite her desk.

"Do sit down. I promise not to insult your hair for the first ten minutes."

"Your generosity is touching."

A month had passed since their meeting at Hogwarts. During that time, Severus had received seven letters from Angelique: four strictly professional, two containing infuriatingly pertinent corrections, and one in which she had written only that clause twelve remained "as insufferable as its author". He had replied to every one of them. Strictly out of administrative necessity.

Severus placed a folder on the desk.

"The British Ministry has added new requirements to the security protocols."

Angelique regarded the document.

"Naturally."

"Some of them were recommended by me."

Angelique opened the folder and began to read.

Severus settled into the chair. Her office was very different from his own. Pale walls were covered with maps, runic diagrams, and neatly arranged shelves. White flowers sat by the window, and a glass bowl held little sweets wrapped in blue paper. Nothing smoked, breathed or appeared capable of killing a student. It suggested a worrying lack of personality.

Angelique turned a page.

"The seals being bound to the designated authorities' signatures is insufficient," he said. "An authorised person can be coerced, Confunded or replaced."

"How reassuring to know what you think of us."

"I think any system that depends on human infallibility is doomed."

"On that, we agree."

Angelique separated two pages and placed them side by side.

"Your proposal adds a fourth signature."

"No. It adds a lock. It belongs to no one and only releases when two schools authorise the same action."

"What prevents two authorities from agreeing on a disastrous idea?"

"Nothing. Architecture is no substitute for judgement. It merely prevents any one of us from altering or withdrawing a champion alone."

Severus leaned across the desk.

"The alternative is to place blind faith in three people simply because they hold respectable titles."

"Which would be dreadful, considering how many criminals have already run Hogwarts."

He slowly raised his eyes.

Angelique was still examining the document. "Including those who were acquitted," she added.

"How considerate."

"Don't mistake candour for hostility, Severus. When I'm being hostile, you'll know the difference."

It was the first time she had used his name.

"Headmaster Snape," he corrected.

"We're alone."

"My title does not depend on the presence of witnesses."

"What an exhausting life you must lead."

Severus ignored the remark.

"The lock would record agreement, nothing more. It would have no identity of its own, would not track champions and would grant no access."

Angelique reread the relevant paragraph.

"That could work."

He waited for an objection. "Is that all?"

"Would you like me to disagree so you can feel at home?"

"I'm trying to understand why you agreed so readily."

"Because it's a good idea."

She took a quill from its holder and made a note in the margin.

"My sister will have to incorporate the lock into the structure."

"Your sister?"

"Claire. She designed the runic architecture of the seals. She also works with ancient runes and hereditary protections. She's better than any specialist in the Republican administration and considerably less tedious."

"I shall examine the final version before it is bound to the champions."

"Naturally. Claire wouldn't allow otherwise either."

Angelique took a sweet from the bowl and unwrapped it.

"Would you like a sweet?"

Severus looked at the small blue object between her fingers.

"No."

"It's sweet."

"I had deduced as much from its location in the sweet bowl."

She popped it into her mouth.

"I thought a little sugar might improve your mood."

"Dumbledore spent years trying to test that theory."

The words came out more quietly than Severus had intended.

Angelique stopped smiling. For a moment, she said nothing. She simply pushed the bowl aside, away from him.

"Then I won't insist."

The absence of teasing unsettled him more than the teasing would have.

She continued reading.

"The accommodation clause has been amended," Angelique said. "The Hogwarts students will stay inside the palace, in the west wing."

"The carriages would be easier to protect."

"And much easier to isolate."

"Isolation can be an advantage."

"Not in a competition whose official purpose is to bring the schools closer together."

"The official purpose is to spare the governments from admitting that they miss dangerous spectacles."

Angelique laughed. It was a brief, unguarded sound.

"I'll have a plan of the west wing sent to you," Angelique said.

"With the boundaries of the wards marked."

She noted the request and laid down her quill.

"Will you join me for tea after the meeting? Without discussing the Tournament."

Severus indicated the pages still left in the folder.

"We haven't finished."

"I noticed."

Angelique resumed reading.

When she closed the folder, Severus stood.

Angelique came around the desk to hand him the documents. Before giving them back, she removed something from his collar. Her fingers brushed the side of his neck.

He caught her wrist.

Angelique opened her hand. A single white hair lay in her palm.

Severus released her.

"Hair is far too useful an ingredient for a witch to collect it casually."

Her smile vanished. She set the folder on the desk and laid the hair on its cover.

"Then keep it."

"Do not touch me again without permission."

"Very well."

There was no irony in her reply. Angelique took a step back.

Severus picked up the folder.

"The next meeting will take place at the end of August," Angelique said, returning to her desk. Her voice had regained its formality. "Some wings of the palace will be closed while we reinforce the wards. The headmasters and technical representatives will be staying at my family's estate."

"That won't be necessary."

"It will. The arrangements have already been agreed with Madame Maxime and the Republican Commission for Magical Security."

She took an envelope from a drawer and placed it before him.

"Your presence will also give you the opportunity to meet Claire and review the proposal for the agreement lock with her."

Severus picked up the envelope.

"Who will accompany Durmstrang?"

"Benedikt hasn't decided yet."

He tucked the invitation inside his robes.

"I shall send my confirmation."

"Bring enough clothes for a few days. The estate is some distance from the school."

"I am perfectly capable of understanding the word 'accommodation'."

"After the incident with the meeting time, I'd rather not make assumptions about your grasp of simple words."

Severus walked towards the door.

"*Mademoiselle* Blanche."

"*Monsieur* Snape."

His hand was already on the door handle when her voice stopped him.

"Severus."

He looked over his shoulder. Angelique stood behind her desk, her hands resting on its edge.

"About the tea," she said. "I meant it."

There was no smile to accompany the words.

Severus held her gaze for a moment. Then he opened the door.

That evening, he sent confirmation of his August visit. He confined himself to the dates.



Chapter 3: Guests Must Be Treated Like Family

Chapter Notes

> Content warning: verbal aggression, memories of humiliation, and physical aggression, including a slap.



The Blanche estate could not be found by anyone looking for it.

Draco explained this for the third time as he led Severus along a narrow road lined with vineyards and tall trees.

"It's not simply a matter of concealment," he said. "The estate rejects anyone who hasn't been invited. If you tried to find it on your own, you could walk all the way to the Spanish border without realising."

"An explanation that would have been useful before I spent forty minutes in that village."

"I sent detailed instructions."

"*'Follow the road to the tree that appears to be watching it'* is not a detailed instruction."

"You found the tree."

"They all appeared to be watching the road."

Draco did not reply. He had been seconded from the Department of International Magical Cooperation to the Hogwarts delegation to audit the Tournament's temporary permissions. According to him, this made his presence indispensable. According to Severus, it was merely another administrative imposition.

The road ended at two white stone pillars. There was no gate between them, only a faint distortion in the air. Draco removed his right glove and touched one of the pillars. Runes appeared on the stone.

"Draco Malfoy and guest," he announced.

"Visiting headmaster," Severus corrected.

"Severus Snape, visiting headmaster and man of legendary patience."

The runes glowed. The distortion parted. Beyond the barrier, the road continued through extensive gardens towards a pale, three-storey manor house. Parts of the building looked very old; others had been added over the centuries without any attempt to maintain a single style. Climbing plants covered one of the towers, and the open windows reflected the late afternoon.

Severus felt the wards as a faint resistance against his chest. The pressure eased with his next step, but left his arms prickling beneath his sleeves. They were complex, woven into the land and the members of the family. There were layers of concealment, blood recognition and something older beneath them all. Hereditary magic.

"Impressive," he admitted.

"Wait until you meet Claire," Draco replied. "She reworked some of the wards."

The front door opened before they reached the steps. A young woman with short blonde hair appeared at the top. She looked about seventeen. She was slender, wore riding breeches and carried a bird resembling a small silver falcon on her shoulder.

"You're late," she told Draco.

"Good afternoon to you too, Lory." Draco turned to Severus. "Loreen Blanche, the youngest sister."

"Angie said you'd be here an hour ago."

"Headmaster Snape had an argument with a tree."

"Did the tree lose?"

Severus gave Draco a look.

"It's still standing."

Lory smiled. A dimple appeared in her right cheek.

"I like him."

Another woman appeared behind Lory. She was taller, with wavy blonde hair and eyes so pale that, at first glance, they seemed almost colourless.

"Claire Blanche," she introduced herself, offering Severus her hand. "I imagine you've come to inspect my runes and find fault."

"Not necessarily in that order."

Claire's hand remained in his for no longer than courtesy required. Then she turned to Draco.

"Bad hair day?"

Draco instinctively ran a hand through his hair, still untidy after the walk.

"Bad face day?"

Claire smiled. After a moment, she held out her hand.

"Good afternoon, Draco."

Draco shook her hand.

"Claire."

Angelique came down the steps. She wore a light dress in the shade of blue Severus was beginning to associate with Beauxbatons. Her hair was pinned up, leaving her neck bare. The memory of her fingers near his collar returned with irritating precision.

Angelique stopped one step above her sisters. All three had the same fair hair; everything else seemed to argue against the family resemblance. Lory balanced a bird of prey on her shoulder and smiled as though she hoped something would go wrong. Claire was still studying Severus with the attention she might have given an incomplete inscription.

Angelique smiled at Draco.

"Welcome back, Draco."

"Thank you, Angie."

Angelique turned to Severus.

"*Monsieur* Snape."

"*Mademoiselle* Blanche."

"I see you survived the journey."

"Barely. Malfoy spent half of it trying to persuade me that trees constitute adequate signposts."

"Our guests usually manage to arrive without declaring war on botany."

"I presume they receive better instructions."

Lory stifled a laugh. Angelique gestured towards the stairs.

"Your rooms are in the upstairs corridor. Try not to blame France if you get lost between floors."

"I already blame France for quite enough."

"Save some for tea."

A house-elf appeared in the entrance hall and levitated their luggage towards the stairs. Draco went upstairs. Severus followed. There were four suites along the corridor. Draco pointed to the door on the left.

"I'm in here."

Then he indicated the next door.

"You're next door."

Severus looked at the door directly opposite.

"And that one?"

"Angie's."

"Are the hosts' quarters not usually separate from the guest rooms?"

"The Blanches have their own ideas about hospitality."

"Naturally."

Severus opened the door to his suite. The room was spacious, with dark furniture, a fireplace and windows overlooking the gardens.

"Benedikt will be in the room next door when he arrives tomorrow," Draco added.

Severus set his gloves on a table.

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Tea was served by the swimming pool. Severus considered this an inappropriately informal setting for a discussion of Tournament security. His assessment had nothing whatsoever to do

with Angelique having exchanged her dress for a dark swimsuit and a pale robe left open over her shoulders.

Nothing whatsoever.

She sat in the shade of a tree, wearing sunglasses and examining the documents Severus had brought. Claire occupied the chair beside her, surrounded by parchments covered in runes.

Lory was swimming. A dark-haired young woman Severus had not yet met sat at the edge of the pool with her feet in the water, arguing with Draco.

"You mustn't put the hippogriff behind the cart," she was saying.

"The cart before the hippogriff," Draco corrected.

"That makes no sense. Hippogriffs shouldn't pull carts."

"That's not the point."

"Then it's a bad proverb," the young woman insisted.

Draco ran a hand over his face.

Angelique noticed Severus's arrival and lifted her sunglasses.

"Is your room satisfactory?"

"I did not come to France to assess bedrooms."

"What a pity. I chose the mattresses myself."

The dark-haired young woman abandoned the argument and stood.

"Hye-jin Moreau," she introduced herself, offering her hand. "Chief Healer at Beauxbatons and an unauthorised presence in this family since I was ten."

"Authorised," Claire corrected without looking up from her parchments.

"Then I have emotional residency," Hye concluded. "That's harder to revoke."

"I don't doubt it."

Hye shook Severus hand and went back to Draco. She dried her feet with a flick of her wand, and the two of them took the remaining chairs at the table.

Severus took the seat opposite Angelique. A teapot awaited him.

He poured himself a cup and tasted it. He paused.

"It's weak."

"You can ask for another pot," Claire said.

"And it's Chinese tea."

"Because we're drinking tea, not reaffirming British sovereignty," Angelique explained.

Severus set his cup on its saucer.

"The French cannot be taught to make tea."

Draco took a sip and grimaced.

"I'm afraid I have to agree with him on that."

"Traitor," Hye declared.

"English," Draco corrected.

"Sometimes it's the same thing," she retorted.

Draco pushed his cup aside and opened the accommodation agreement beside his saucer.

"Does authorisation to enter this estate expire when the last guest leaves or when the Tournament ends?"

"When the last guest leaves," Claire replied.

"The wording says 'for the duration of the Tournament'. If the competition is suspended, the house might consider it still in progress."

Claire drew the document towards her. She read the clause once and reached for her quill.

"Now it expires when the last guest leaves."

"Is that why we brought him?" Hye asked. "To find bureaucratic ways of never leaving?"

"Among other international threats," Draco replied.

Lory climbed out of the pool and wrapped herself in a towel before approaching the table.

"Does he know?"

Angelique did not look up from the documents.

"Not yet."

"Know what?" Severus asked.

Lory pulled up a chair and sat down.

"I'm entering the Tournament."

The silence around the table was brief but noticeable.

"Are you old enough?" Severus asked.

"I turned seventeen in March."

"Old enough to enter," Angelique said. "Not necessarily old enough to believe she's immortal."

"I don't believe I'm immortal," Lory replied. "If I did, coming close to death wouldn't be any fun."

"That entire sentence is why I'm not reassured."

Hye stopped smiling.

"Don't make it sound beautiful, Lory. The adrenaline lasts a few minutes. Trauma finds ways to last for years."

"I know."

"You don't," Hye replied without harshness. "And I hope you never have to."

Lory tilted her chin towards Angelique before turning to Severus.

"My sister's been like this for three months."

"Your sister knows the risks."

"My sister thinks knowing the risks means she can stop me taking them."

"Frequently, it does."

"You risked your own life too."

The table fell silent again.

Angelique took off her sunglasses.

"Lory."

"What? It's true."

Severus studied the young woman. Lory did not look away as the table remained quiet.

"For precisely that reason," he replied, "I recognise a stupid idea when I hear one."

Lory narrowed her eyes.

"So you don't think I should compete?"

"I think wanting something dangerous and being prepared to survive it are two different things."

"And how do I find out whether I'm prepared?"

"If you're selected, probably in the worst possible way."

Lory pulled the towel round her shoulders and looked out over the water. Angelique put her sunglasses back on. Her shoulders had relaxed a little.

Claire brought a diagram into the middle of the table and moved its edge out of the path of a drop running off the towel.

"Mind my calculations."

Lory gathered the wet end into her lap. Hye moved a cup aside to make room, and Severus leant over the diagram.

Claire had incorporated the agreement lock Severus had proposed into the design. To verify the champions' identities, the combined wards would produce a mark when they recognised them simultaneously.

"The verification mark will be renewed every hour," she explained. "Any change in magical identity breaks the link."

"Polyjuice Potion or possession?" Severus asked.

"The potion changes the body, not the underlying signature. The seal identifies the external presence."

"Biological samples?"

Claire raised her pale eyes.

"Hair, blood and nails can fool the first layer. Not the ones after it."

Severus thought of the white hair laid on the folder at Beauxbatons.

"For how long?"

"A few seconds. Perhaps a minute, if the forger is very competent."

"A minute is long enough to kill someone."

Angelique watched the exchange in silence.

"Then we'll add continuous verification," Claire decided. "The seal won't just check who's wearing it. It'll check who keeps wearing it."

Severus examined the diagram again.

"That will require an anchor point in each task area."

"I've already started preparing them."

"I want to inspect them."

Claire nodded and went back to smoothing a crease in the parchment. Draco leant over to study the parchment, moving closer to Claire. She explained one of the sequences, pointing to the

symbols. When she looked up, he was still watching her.

"Are you following, Malfoy?"

"Perfectly."

"Then explain the last sequence."

Draco looked at the runes.

"It's decorative."

Claire smiled.

"You know absolutely nothing about runes."

"I know when an expert wants to show me she's cleverer than I am."

"You must get plenty of practice."

Lory and Hye exchanged a look.

Severus decided to concentrate on the documents.

***

That evening, everyone gathered in the dining room.

The Blanche sisters appeared incapable of eating a meal in silence. Lory discussed the Tournament's possible tasks, and Hye told an incomprehensible story about an attempt to transport a piano through a fireplace. Lory wanted to know whether the piano had arrived in one piece.

"The piano did," Hye replied.

Draco laughed. Claire smiled at him and waited for him to put down his glass.

"How long have you been working for the Department?" Claire asked Draco.

"My first contract was nearly four years ago."

"And before that?"

"I did research for a specialist. Evelyn Ward."

Hye resumed her story, now describing what had happened to the fireplace. Draco took the opportunity to cut his meat.

"Were you already living in London?" Claire asked.

He looked up from his plate.

"Yes."

Claire waited for him to put down his knife.

"Did you ever ask after us?"

Draco set down his fork as well.

"I did."

Hye broke off her story about the piano.

"This isn't a conversation, Claire," she observed. "It's an interrogation served with wine."

"He can refuse to answer."

"And you'd turn the refusal into an answer," Draco said.

Claire raised her glass to him.

"You're learning."

"I'm setting boundaries."

Her smile remained. Claire set down her glass and did not ask a fifth question.

Angelique sat at the head of the table, although no one appeared to consider this any protection against interruptions. Hye stole food from her plate. Claire interrupted a sentence to correct Draco. Lory asked for the salt just as a house-elf appeared with a question about the wine. Angelique answered the elf, passed the salt cellar to Hye, who handed it to Lory, and resumed the conversation at the very word where she had been interrupted.

This was a side of her Severus had not seen before. It made her more difficult, not less.

"Benedikt will be here tomorrow before lunch," she remarked.

Severus cut the meat on his plate.

"Let us hope the trees are clearer with him."

"He knows the way."

"Naturally."

Hye looked from Severus to Angelique.

"Is there a draught in here?"

"No," Claire replied.

"Strange. It suddenly got cold."

Angelique hid her smile behind her glass. Lory began to tell them how she had found the silver falcon.

Severus turned back to his plate, wondering what else they had noticed before he could hide it.

Dinner lasted almost three hours. Severus only noticed when the clock in the room struck eleven; he could not remember looking at it since he had sat down.

***

Severus could not sleep.

The mattress Angelique had chosen herself was not to blame. It was too comfortable, if anything. The house was quiet; the hum of the wards, earlier mingled with the sound of pool water and voices, was now clear in his room. Severus closed his eyes. He could still hear it.

At midnight, he gave up.

He put on his dressing gown and went in search of the library Claire had mentioned over dinner. Angelique's door, across the corridor, was closed as he passed. Severus spent almost an hour examining French treatises on identity magic. When he returned to the bedroom corridor, he found light beneath her door.

The door was ajar. Severus stopped.

From where he stood, he could see part of the room reflected in a tall mirror. Angelique sat at her dressing table, her hair loose down her back. She was applying an ointment to her left shoulder, where a red line marked her skin.

He ought to go to his own room.

"Are you going to stand in the corridor all night?" she asked.

Severus did not move.

Angelique met his eyes in the mirror.

"I left the door open."

"An imprecise method of issuing invitations."

"The precise ones haven't worked particularly well so far."

She closed the ointment jar and drew the fabric of her dressing gown over her shoulder.

"Come in or go away, Severus. The draught is unpleasant."

He went in. He did not close the door.

"What happened to your shoulder?"

"I tested the continuous verification Claire proposed, after dinner. One of the runes in the test circuit reacted."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I thought it would be a simple alteration."

"You should have called someone."

"It's a scratch."

"Scratches do not usually cause magical burns."

"And excessive caution doesn't usually get tournaments ready on time."

"Your impatience caused a burn. Do not confuse recklessness with efficiency."

Angelique watched him in the mirror.

"Are you worried about me?"

"I am worried about the person responsible for Tournament security testing wards without assistance."

"How romantic."

Severus moved close enough to examine the mark.

"May I?"

She nodded. He carefully moved the fabric aside and placed two fingers beside the burn. The skin was warm, but the residual magic was weak.

Angelique remained still.

"It's not serious," he concluded.

"I told you it wasn't."

Severus withdrew his hand.

"Then why did you leave the door open?"

She turned on the stool.

"Because you still haven't answered my invitation to tea."

"I confirmed that I would return in August."

"You confirmed the dates, Severus."

Angelique stood. Even barefoot, she could meet his gaze without tilting her face up very far.

"I told you I meant it."

"And I heard you."

"But you didn't answer."

Severus regarded her for a moment.

"You seemed more interested in provoking me."

"At first, perhaps."

The direct answer unsettled him.

"And now?"

"Now I still like provoking you."

She took a step towards him.

"But that isn't all."

Severus felt the urge to step back and despised it.

"What do you want from me, Angelique?"

"At this moment?"

"No games."

She took a deep breath.

"I want to kiss you."

The whole house seemed to fall silent.

Severus could have answered with sarcasm. He could have mentioned the differences between them, the proximity of her sisters or the risks of mixing personal relationships with the organisation of the Tournament. He said only:

"No."

Angelique held his gaze for another moment and nodded.

"Very well."

She moved away at once, adjusted the dressing gown over her shoulder and turned back to the dressing table.

Severus waited for a retort. Angelique simply picked up the ointment jar and put it away in the drawer.

He turned towards the door but did not take a step. In her office, she had moved the sweets away when he mentioned Dumbledore. Now, too, she was letting him end the conversation without demanding an explanation. He had enjoyed her company over dinner. He wanted to know her beyond the duties that had brought them together.

"Angelique."

She looked back.

Severus crossed the space between them and stopped in front of her.

"Do you still want to?"

Angelique did not look away.

"Yes."

Severus took her face in his hands. Angelique closed her fingers around the fabric of his dressing gown, and the distance between their mouths almost vanished.

A smile began to form on her lips. Severus stopped.

He was used to examining proposals before accepting them. Now he stood with his hands framing her face, searching for a motive he knew how to recognise. For a moment, Severus heard other laughter, in other corridors. The expectant pause before some act of cruelty proved amusing to everyone but him.

"How much?" he asked.

She frowned.

"How much what?"

"What was the bet?"

Her fingers loosened on his dressing gown.

"There was no bet."

Angelique was no longer smiling. Severus lowered his hands.

"A dare, then?"

"What are you talking about?"

He let a moment pass. When he spoke again, he lowered his voice.

"Who paid you?"

The slap rang through the room.

Angelique did not use magic. She did not need to. Severus stood motionless, his cheek burning.

Her eyes shone, but there were no tears. Only a fury far colder than any of her earlier provocations.

"Get out."

He understood what he had done too late.

"Angelique—"

"Do you think so little of me, or so little of yourself?"

Severus opened his mouth.

She pointed to the door.

"Get out of my room."

He took a step back. Angelique followed and held the door open.

"And do not touch me again without my permission."

The door closed in his face.

Severus stood alone in the corridor, his cheek still burning and her perfume on his hands.

His room was less than three steps away. It seemed much farther away than England.



Chapter 4: The Champion’s Seal



The Portkey deposited Severus on the gravel path with unnecessary violence.

He recovered his balance before he could fall, straightened his robes and gave the rusty old kettle now lying between his feet a hostile look. Draco appeared a second later and had to steady himself with a hand on Severus's shoulder.

"Not a word," Severus warned.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"You're smiling."

"I feel sick."

"Try to express your suffering with less delight."

Beauxbatons rose before them in the pale morning light. The palace seemed even larger than Severus remembered. Banners from the three schools hung from its towers, and temporary

structures occupied part of the gardens. Witches and wizards crossed the courtyard carrying crates, tapestries and enchanted objects that protested in various languages. The delegations were due to arrive the following day.

Three weeks had passed since the night at the Blanche estate. In that time, Severus and Angelique had exchanged eleven letters. Every one began with "Headmaster Snape", ended with "Yours sincerely, A. Blanche" and contained not a single word that could be interpreted as personal. He had replied in the same tone. It was what they should both have done from the beginning.

"Are you prepared?" Draco asked.

"To conduct a security inspection?"

"To see Angie."

Severus began walking.

"My relationship with Mademoiselle Blanche is strictly professional."

Draco looked at him, and the corner of his mouth lifted.

Angelique was waiting at the top of the main steps. She wore formal dark-blue robes, her hair pinned up without a strand out of place and a small silver Beauxbatons badge on her chest. Claire stood to her right with several parchments under her arm. Hye-jin Moreau stood on the other side, dressed in the white and blue of the school's healers.

Lory stood a few steps below them. A silver disc hung from a chain at her throat.

This time, there would be no central artefact to select the three champions. Each school had received a blank seal and would conduct the process on its own premises: eligible candidates registered their names and magical signatures in a matrix linked to the disc; at the appointed hour, the seal would choose one signature and bind itself to it. The joint ceremony at Beauxbatons would merely present the three results.

The disc around Lory's neck meant that Beauxbatons' selection was already complete.

Severus stopped.

"No," he said before he had even greeted them.

Lory raised her chin.

"Good morning to you too."

Severus turned to Angelique.

"She was selected?"

"Last night," Angelique replied.

No teasing. No smile.

"Were you involved in the selection?"

Her eyes hardened.

"I declared a conflict of interest when Lory entered her name. The matrix was opened and the process witnessed without my participation. The seal chose her and bound itself to her signature."

"Who witnessed the selection?"

"The school's selection committee and an observer from the Confederation. Our relationship required me to recuse myself; it did not require Lory's exclusion."

Lory folded her arms.

"I'm right here."

"I noticed," Severus replied.

"And I'm the Beauxbatons champion."

He examined the disc around her neck. Tiny runes covered the edge, alternating between silver and a faint blue.

"For now."

Lory smiled without humour.

"Then try to keep up."

Angelique came down a step.

"Headmaster Snape, you've had a long journey. Perhaps we should proceed with the inspection before discussing our champion's merits."

The formality was flawless.

Severus would rather she had insulted him.

"Naturally, Mademoiselle Blanche."

Angelique's fingers tightened around a folder.

Claire looked from one to the other.

"This is going to be unbearable, isn't it?"

"It already is," Draco murmured.

Hye gestured Lory towards the corridor.

"Let's check your seal again."

***

Claire checked the diagrams at the entrance to the seal chamber beneath Beauxbatons' central tower.

The room was circular, its pale stone walls covered in runic sequences. Three pillars stood in the centre, each marked with a school's crest. They served as displays: once all three champions had been chosen, each pillar would reproduce the status of one champion's seal from a distance. Two were still dark; the Beauxbatons pillar already responded to the silver disc around Lory's neck.

Benedikt von Veltheim stood before the Durmstrang pillar.

"Severus," he greeted him. "I was beginning to think the trees had captured you again."

"Apparently that story has travelled across Europe."

"Only the civilised parts."

Benedikt shook his hand and greeted Draco. Then he turned to Angelique.

"Everything ready?"

"Almost. And Durmstrang's technical representative?" Angelique asked.

"I decided to take responsibility for checking my school's authorisations," Benedikt replied.

He touched her arm with easy familiarity as he passed.

Claire handed out the diagrams and indicated the three small viewers on the table, made from a dark stone that did not reflect light.

"The viewers allow the school authorities to read the champions' seals. They cannot alter them. To extract a champion from a task or change a ward, two schools must agree."

"And if two of the designated authorities are incapacitated?" Severus asked.

"The system recognises unconsciousness, possession and death," Claire replied. "In that case, it temporarily transfers authorisation to the remaining representative and the Chief Healer."

Hye raised her hand.

"Me."

"A healer close to the family of one of the champions," Severus observed.

Hye did not appear offended.

"That's why my authorisation doesn't work for Lory. If she needs to be extracted and only Angie is conscious, the seal will summon another registered healer."

Severus examined the diagram.

"Who devised the substitution?"

"I did," Hye replied. "Then Claire spent a week finding ways to kill me on paper."

"I found twenty-three," Claire added.

"Twenty-one. Two involved decisions I would never make."

"An enemy doesn't depend on you making intelligent decisions."

"That's why we're friends," Hye explained to Severus. "She believes in my potential for catastrophe."

"Since our first year," Claire said.

Lory stepped onto the central platform. The seal around her neck began to glow blue.

"Do I have to stand still?"

"It would be an interesting experience," Angelique replied.

Hye checked the young woman's pulse and touched her wand to the centre of the disc. A luminous figure appeared in the air. It reproduced Lory's silhouette, surrounded by information that changed with every breath. Claire compared the projected signature with the record on the diagram and checked the location indicator, which showed the platform.

"Normal heart rate," Hye said. "Stable magical flow. No sign of interference."

Severus approached.

"May I examine the seal?"

Lory held the chain.

"Without touching me."

"That won't be necessary."

She held the disc away from her clothes. Severus passed his wand around the edge of the seal. The runes responded one by one: identity, location, consciousness, physical integrity, external presence. He stopped his wand as he completed the circuit. It was only a moment.

"Again," he ordered.

"Is something wrong?" Angelique asked.

Severus repeated the movement. Claire counted the responses on the luminous diagram: five. All within the expected interval.

"There was a delay in the sequence on the first reading," Severus said.

Claire moved closer.

"Which one?"

"External presence."

She checked the luminous diagram.

"It may have been adjusting to his signature," Claire said, keeping her wand on the last line. "But it shouldn't happen. The seal will remain isolated until I find the cause."

"Does that mean I can't compete?" Lory asked.

"It means no one will connect your seal to the task areas while there's a response I can't explain," Claire replied.

"Acceptable," Severus said.

Lory sighed.

"I was worried my own seal needed your approval."

"Not mine," Severus replied. "It needs to pass inspection by all three schools."

Lory let the disc settle against her chest and stepped down from the platform.

"Still sounds like your hobby."

***

The inspection continued for the rest of the morning.

Severus examined the outer wards, the accommodation, the infirmary and the extraction points. He found four minor flaws, two questionable decisions and one tapestry in criminally bad taste. Angelique noted the relevant observations and ignored the rest. They were never alone.

Whenever Severus approached, she found a member of staff to call over, a document to consult or a sister in urgent need of her attention. Her skill at avoiding him would have been admirable under different circumstances.

At lunch, she sat between Benedikt and a representative of the Republican Commission for Magical Security. Severus sat at the other end of the table. Draco settled beside him.

"Claire told me," Draco said quietly.

Severus turned towards him.

"She told Claire?"

"Claire heard the slap through the wall and went to find her. She only told me after swearing she wouldn't kill you before the Tournament."

"Touching."

"She's still considering it."

Draco buttered a slice of bread.

"Apologise."

"I did not ask for your opinion."

"That's never stopped you offering yours."

"This is none of your concern."

Severus folded his napkin.

"Have you finished?"

"No."

"Malfoy."

"Sir?"

"Be quiet."

Draco obeyed. He kept dragging the knife through the butter until the bread tore into pieces.

***

Late that afternoon, the representatives of the three delegations returned to the seal chamber to register their final signatures.

Claire placed the three viewers on the pillars. Severus and Benedikt touched their schools' crests with their wands and spoke the authorisation sequences. Angelique pressed her Deputy Headmistress's badge against the Beauxbatons pillar before doing the same; the authority delegated to her by Maxime allowed her signature to be accepted.

Blue magic spread across the walls. Severus recognised Angelique's signature immediately. It was intense, precise and faintly warm, like the sensation her fingers had left on his skin. The memory was useless. He concentrated on the ritual. The three authorisations met in the centre of the chamber and engaged the agreement lock. No fourth signature appeared; the system merely registered that no school could act alone. The viewers lit up. Claire handed the first to Benedikt. The second to Angelique. Finally, she approached Severus.

"This one's yours. Once activated, it won't respond to anyone else."

Severus touched the Hogwarts viewer with the tip of his wand. Silver lines appeared on the surface, forming the crests of the three schools.

Lory put a hand to her seal.

"I felt something."

Hye was beside her at once.

"Pain?"

"No. As though someone had tugged on the chain."

Severus examined the viewer. For a fraction of a second, two blue dots appeared where there should have been only one. Then they merged.

"Did you see that?" he asked Claire.

"I did."

She suspended the ritual with a movement of her wand and drew an isolation circle around the Beauxbatons pillar.

"The duplication is the same fault as the one in the presence sequence," she said. "We won't connect the seal to the task areas."

"Can you identify the second location?" Angelique asked.

"Not from here. The Beauxbatons viewer is accepting the second signal as though it were also coming from Lory."

Claire looked at the Hogwarts viewer in Severus's hand.

"The Hogwarts viewer doesn't recognise our internal permissions. Examine it outside this chamber. A foreign signature might reveal what ours is accepting."

"I shall," Severus replied.

"Alone?" Angelique asked.

"I shall take the necessary precautions."

"Report any change immediately."

"Naturally, *Mademoiselle* Blanche."

Severus left the chamber without waiting for anyone.

***

The Hogwarts headmaster's room was in a tower well away from the students. It was comfortable, bright and decorated in so many shades of blue that Severus missed the dungeons. He waited for the castle to fall silent. At midnight, he drew the curtains, locked the door and placed the Hogwarts viewer on the table. He cast three isolation spells around the room and took a small instrument case from his pocket.

The first examination revealed nothing.

The second showed only the runes Claire had described.

On the third, Severus changed the angle of the light and applied a revealing solution to the viewer's edge.

A dark line appeared beneath the location indicator displayed by the viewer. He leant closer. It was not part of the data the seal was supposed to send.

With the tip of a silver needle, he carefully separated the two lines projected by the viewer. The legitimate location glowed above. Beneath it, almost invisible, lay another symbol.

Transmission. Someone had turned Lory's seal into a beacon.

Severus held his breath and examined the surrounding strokes. The insertion was sophisticated. It did not breach the wards or alter the vital signs; it copied at least the champion's location and sent it to an external receiver. Whoever had done it knew the structure Claire had created. Knew the signatures of the authorities designated by the three schools. And had had access to the seal or its creation process.

Severus touched his wand to the hidden rune.

"*Ostende originem*."

The symbol resisted. He increased the magical pressure. The dark line opened and revealed a blue authorisation mark.

Beauxbatons.

Severus felt his stomach tighten. The rune had been inserted using the school's internal credentials. There was still a way to discover where it was transmitting. It would be risky: the receiver might detect someone investigating the link. Severus thought of calling Angelique. He remembered the door closing in his face.

He pushed the memory aside. This was not personal.

He built a containment circle around the viewer and cast the tracking spell. The hidden rune came to life.

A blue thread crossed the room, passed through the tower wall and vanished into the horizon. On the table, the enchanted map of the region unfolded by itself. The line travelled across fields, roads and villages until it stopped at a protected area that should not have appeared on any map.

Severus recognised the place. The Blanche estate.

Someone at Beauxbatons was tracking Lory. And the receiver was inside her family's home.

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