**Chapter 50**

**Dragon Hour**

**28 August 1993, Zabini Manor, England**

“Champion of the Morrigan! I want a goat for dinner and a good scratching of my scales!”

For a second the Potter Heiress doubted before realising it had to be a big joke. Dragons didn’t speak. Dragons couldn’t speak. They were big fire-breathing reptiles in the XXXXX category, very dangerous lizards, but reptiles nonetheless. Dragons were not able to speak in a language like English. Parseltongue may be one of their methods of communication, but Alexandra wasn’t the Boy-Who-Lived or the Heir of Slytherin.

Alexandra drew her wand and began to cast some spells to locate the person playing with her, maybe one of the dragon-handlers or a visitor of Lady Zabini. But each of her Charms answered negatively. If there was another human in the vicinity, he was under wards or illusions she wasn’t able to pierce.

“That’s a good trick,” she tried to make her voice assured. “Where is the ventriloquist?”

Apparently, it was the wrong thing to say.

The dragon emitted a loud roar before exhaling a new fire stream.

“I AM OFFENDED!” roared the Green Welsh. “DO YOU THINK DRAGONS ARE UNABLE TO SPEAK?”

“Err...” this was like one of those questions a Professor asked after lunch when you were half-sleeping and hadn’t the slightest clue how to answer.

“Never mind,” growled Old Frederick the too-talkative dragon. “Young generations are ignorant and intolerant, it is unfortunately a reality of your short-lived and miserable species. Now bring me my goats. I have missed dinner and I am quite hungry.”

The Ravenclaw witch decided to play along until proof of the contrary that it was indeed the dragon speaking. But it didn’t mean she was going to obey the fantastical creature. One, she was not under his orders, thank you very much. Two, disobeying the safety regulations given by Lady Zabini was not a smart idea, especially when a big hungry dragon was involved.

“If you think I am going in your enclosure while you’re awake and hungry, you are not that smart,” she replied defensively.

This sentence was the signal for the dragon to breath flame again. By the forges of Erebor and the Moria, the clearing was beginning to be hellishly hot. The wards of the enclosure protected her from the flames, but the temperature was rising, magical protections or not.

“Careful, Champion,” the draconian voice thundered. “I have killed more knights and wizards than you have seen winters.”

“And I’ve killed two Basilisks last spring, dragon,” Alexandra called back, trying to not wonder how in the name of Rowena Ravenclaw the dragon could know she was the Morrigan’s Champion. “I fought trolls, a Cerberus, a Summon, Dark Wizards, and monsters. If you think you are a worthy opponent, you are sorely mistaken!”

The dragon contorted its long neck before growling in a different manner.

“Humph, humph, you are not lying, interesting.” Large clouds of smoke were emitted from the big nostrils. “If you are telling the truth, maybe one day you will be worthy of your title...NOW BRING ME MY GOATS!”

Alexandra sighed before marching to the underground basement where the poor livestock was waiting. Judging by their noises, the herbivores had guessed accurately their lives on this earth were about to end.

The thirteen-year old witch didn’t like it, but she had to know how the dragon had known she was a Champion. This was dangerous information; she couldn’t afford rumours of it arriving to the ears of the Ministry.

Levitating the goats was not difficult; one by one Alexandra took them by the same stairs she had taken the first day. After that well...let’s just say the goats tried to run for a few seconds.

It was not a victorious strategy. One by one, the three goats tried to jump and rush out of the enclosure. Each time, the dragon struck with terrifying swiftness and plunged its large fangs in their bodies.

And the Green Welsh were supposed to be one of the least dangerous breed of dragons, slow and not aggressive.

If someone asked her for the job of dragon-handler, Alexandra promised to decline the moment it was offered. She was not crazy.

“Good, good. Now the brush,” announced the satiated dragon. “I have an itch on the belly which needs to be scratched.”

“Are you sure you’re not just lazy?”

“Nonsense,” the enormous tail struck the ground like a whip, sending part of the bones left from the second goat twenty feet away. “I am not lazy; I carefully spare my energy and my old bones.”

“Hum...” That sounded like the definition of laziness to her. But then arguing with a centuries-old dragon was unlikely to result in behaviour changes. It was like hoping Binns stopped droning about his Goblin Rebellions. “How did you know I am a Champion of the Morrigan?”

A reptilian eye fixed her for a good minute before an answer came. In the meantime, she had to brush the yellow belly of the dragon.

“Your aura is a green light surrounded by crows, for those who can see,” was the discouraging answer. “For dragons, you are like a lighthouse in a world of darkness.” A huge paw seized the mortal remains of third goat before engulfing them voraciously. “Of course only old dragons will be able to converse and we aren’t that many to live anymore. The Statute made sure of that...”

Alexandra was at a loss.

“I thought the Statute was merely a law to separate the magical and non-magical world...”

“And what do you think happened to the intelligent species who didn’t agree with the wizards?” retorted Old Frederick. “We dragons were perfectly content with our places in this world. We did not care about the Wars of the Light and the Dark. We were bankers, protectors of art, librarian guardians, knight-killers, and grand councillors. Do you think we wanted to be parked in preserves and slaughtered like cattle?”

A long breath escaped the dragon’s maw, bringing more smoke and burning embers into existence.

“They erased our existence from the world and after that they slaughtered our population before drugging us with their cursed Potions. Today, a baby dragon must receive more dumb-inducing Potions in his first month of life than you will drink alcohol bottles in your entire life...”

It was difficult to imagine the feelings of a non-human speaker, in normal circumstances. But here, Alexandra didn’t need a lot of reflection to know the predominant emotion was sorrow.

“The Age of Dragons is over,” concluded the dragon. “For all my wisdom and power, I am just the remnant of a dead era. You are no exception, Morrigan’s Champion...your powers are hated and in time will fade for there is no one to believe anymore.”

The green-eyed girl continued to brush for several minutes, not speaking. What Old Frederick said was unfortunately the truth. Dark Powers, to say the understatement of the century, were not welcome in Wizarding Britain. Champions and Dark Wizards were sentenced to Azkaban, the Dementor’s Kiss, or the Veil of Death if there was sufficient evidence.

All of this gave her the idea to annoy the Ministry in a big nasty plan. It would probably take years. It would certainly cost more money than she had in her vaults. But she was a reader of the Lord of the Rings, damn it, and it would not be said that the Potter Heiress was going to let this world let magic fade like in the Fourth Age of Middle Earth.

Now that she thought of it, had Tolkien been what the wizards called a Squib? Because his descriptions about that world had some points which did not seem so far-fetched anymore...

“I am Alexandra Potter...” she told the fire-breathing being, “and I think the fight is not over. There is still hope for your species.”

“Oh?” The neck of the dragon twisted impossibly to look at her from both eyes. “You mean it, interesting.” The dragon’s tail struck several rocks in fast succession. “Bah, it’s not like my race has other reasons to hope. Don’t take too long before acting, Alexandra Potter. I am not getting younger...”

She nodded before walking back without turning her back from the dragon. It was a relief when she was back in the clearing and she didn’t wait before rushing back to the castle.

Lady Zabini was seated near a fountain when she arrived under a bright lantern where blue flames joyously burned.

“You have spoken with Old Frederick, I see,” remarked her guardian.

“You knew he was speaking!”

This provoked a burst of laughter from Lady Zabini.

“He’s always speaking when he is not asleep. It’s more him staying quiet which is astonishing...”

Alexandra smiled before remembering the words of the old dragon.

“Was he telling the truth? Did the wizards truly massacre the dragons and transform them into dumb beasts?”

“Yes, it is.”

Alexandra raised her eyes to watch the stars over her head. It was better to do that than show her disgust. It looked like whatever history they had been told at Hogwarts was at best a gigantic lie and their books had all been subject to heavy ‘creative interpreting’ of past events. To be sure, if she learned the ancient wizards had lost all the ‘goblin rebellions’ right now, the Potter Heiress wouldn’t be surprised.

“I am really not proud to be a witch tonight.”

“The world can be beautiful, but it is also cruel,” replied philosophically the Lady of House Zabini. “Try not to take it personally. You are not responsible for the sins of your ancestors...whatever others might say.”

**29 August 1993, Luxembourg, Luxembourg**

Organising this conference between the four schools had been a nightmare of politics. To begin with, each of the four schools involved wanted to host it. It was understandable, for hosting such a prestigious summit often granted a decisive advantage in the selection, but it had given him uncountable headaches.

After several months of debate, the ICW Sports Department had decided to stop the uncontrollable debate. The conference was to take place in a great historic palace loaned to them by the Ministry of Luxembourg for the negotiation day.

One way or another, this gigantic mistake was going to find a conclusion today. Hundreds of hours spent in fruitless exchanges, dozens of international relationships ruined, and the political bickering had never been so high.

These last days, Lucius was often wondering what in the name of Merlin Albus Dumbledore had been thinking when he had declared to the other Headmasters and Mistresses of various European schools he intended to resurrect the ‘Tri-Wizard Tournament’. Maybe the old Light Lord had thought they were going to accept Hogwarts welcoming the event without a protestation?

To be fair, Lucius admitted that one or two years ago, the Chief Warlock could probably have gotten away with it. It would have cost him thousands of favours, he would have had to ‘convince’ with his personal fortune the recalcitrant opponents and his personal prestige would have been massively diminished, but there was a good chance the inter-school Tournament would have happened according to his desires.

It would have been a disaster, of course. Lucius had seen the first draft of what Bagman had intended to take place at Hogwarts. There was no way it could be anything but an economic catastrophe. Six thousand seats to sell for three entire events, and this included the seats of the Hogwarts and foreign students –who naturally didn’t pay to sit in the stands. To make it worse, it would have been the triumph of boredom.

The Head of the House Malfoy didn’t say it was respectful to create a touristic market when the student-champions could die at every moment. But there was a difference between partying every Friday evening and three miserable tasks where three champions were authorised to participate with one winter ball in the middle. It had taken all his persuasion to add a Quidditch Tournament and a Duelling Contest. Admittedly, the latter had not been taught at Hogwarts for some time but Filius Flitwick should be able to train a few promising students to his exacting standards, no?

That said, Lucius didn’t believe in Hogwarts’ chances to host this Tournament. Not that he was unhappy about it. The Quidditch World Cup and the latest security measures ordered by the Ministry had brought the gold reserves close to nothingness and the Department Heads were already whispering an augmentation of taxes was in the next legislation to be voted...and the ‘Tri-Wizard Tournament’ had never been accounted for in the 1994 budget previsions. If he had been happy about it, it wouldn’t have changed the outcome. There had been some modifications to the first draft, but as long as you had Bagman to destroy your best ideas, the candidature was doomed from the start.

Fortunately, it was not the Heads of the Sports Departments who spoke today. No, this privilege had been granted to the Headmasters and Headmistresses. And by the luck of the draw, Hogwarts had the honour to begin with their proposal.

After a short musical interlude, the Headmaster of the British school where he had sent his son and Heir arrived on the podium and faced the large European-dominated audience which had made the journey today. It took several minutes of course for the greetings and the thank-you’s to be out of the way and then his chief political opponent began reading in French the final version of the text decided with Bagman and Crouch.

“The Hogwarts Proposal for an enjoyable Inter-School Tournament is for two students of each school to compete together. Two replacements per school would be authorised for the length of the Tournament. We plan to welcome the other three participating schools from October to June for five tasks of great magical deeds...”

So far, so good. Bagman had not been happy at the idea of a duo of champions. The indebted fool had the gall to tell him that in Quidditch, there weren’t two Seekers in the same team for the Golden Snitch! Crouch had had to intervene and tell the former Beater the other schools would want a far greater number of champions and that two was just the absolute minimum if they didn’t want to be the laughingstock of Europe – and perhaps the entire world.

“There will be four great events along these tasks. In chronological order: a Quidditch Competition between the four school teams, the Winter Ball, a week-long Duelling Tournament, and the Hogsmeade Day Celebrations.”

Lucius watched the audience and saw that while the spectators weren’t in awe, they weren’t disappointed either. But the tasks were the real attraction and they were going to be addressed now. Animated pictures of what the transformed Quidditch Pitch would look like as well as several nearby locations.

“The Trial of Fire will demand champions possessing exceptional bravery and skill. They will have to recover the clue for the following tasks from a XXXXX-class creature. The Trial of Earth will test their resources and their cleverness in an underground environment. The trial of Water will confront them to their own limits and the capability of wards in the middle of water. The Trial of Air will challenge their skills in Charms and Transfiguration at altitudes they are not prepared for. And the Final Trial will be a labyrinth-obstacle course where the duo to be declared winner will reach the Cup of the Tournament first.”

There were polite applauses and many cheers, but the wizards and witches didn’t jump on their seats to demand the Tournament for Hogwarts. The images and the animations projected for the audience were underwhelming, Lucius was ready to recognise this. And frankly for all Albus tried to be mysterious, people could guess what these tasks would involve. The first task was going to be one dragon against two wizards. The Trial of Earth would be a wandless challenge in the underground of the Forbidden Forrest. The Trial of Water was a ward-curse swimming race at the surface of the Black Lake. The Trial of Air was another race on platforms five hundred feet above the ground where Charms were the only salvation. And the final trial was in a labyrinth filled with traps, enchantments and all sort of dangerous creatures. If Hogwarts was chosen, Bagman and Dumbledore hoped to transform the Quidditch Pitch into this impenetrable maze.

It was not a bad event if you wanted to invite a friendly school and a few hundred spectators. To attract a European-wide audience, it was completely insufficient. Dumbledore had not finished however.

“We expect to sell ten thousand tickets for the upcoming Tournament...eternal glory...a new era of magical cooperation...and for the winning duo of the Triwizard Tournament, a great award of ten thousand Galleons free of taxes.”

And just like this, Lucius understood Dumbledore had lost the men and women who had to be convinced. The great schools of Europe had students with impressive titles of nobility and many were about to be hired for well-paid jobs. A star player of Quidditch would earn that much money in a single year. Why would he – or she – want to take the very high risk of death against a dangerous dragon for pocket money? There were some insane kids, but the majority would stay at home...ten thousand Galleons divided in two was not a good reason to lose a year of education.

Dumbledore babbled a few more minutes before receiving the cheers for his expose and going to sit to the left of Bagman. The Headmaster’s visage was a mask, but he didn’t look pleased at all. If Lucius had to guess, either he or Bagman was currently being cursed in the old wizard’s head.

Next to be called was the High Master of Durmstrang and Lucius had to deploy much of his Occlumency in order to stay calm and collected. The man had betrayed them in the worst manner possible, and if the Death Eaters weren’t working in cells, with code names and the greatest secrecy possible, the man who appeared now would have sold them all to Bagnold and Crouch.

And unless you had been sleeping when the Chief Warlock and former Supreme Mugwump was speaking, it was high and clear Igor Karkaroff was not going to adhere to the same qualities elevated by his British counterpart.

“This Tournament is a tournament of strength. Every trial, every opponent, is an obstacle to overcome. The wizards and witches of this world are not created equal! Many are born with greater wealth, beauty, and talents! Yet with magic everything is possible for magic is might! The same is true for this Tournament! The weak and the strong can participate but the trials will tell us who deserves to climb to the top and who has no place in a society of strong and disciplined wizards and witches! With every trial, the strong will evolve and look forwards to a better future. Weakness will be purged. The winning school of this Tournament will receive an award of ten thousand Galleons. And the Champion having cumulated the greatest amount of points in the twelve trials will receive one million Galleons for his exceptional Mastery of the Magical Arts!”

A thunder of applauses followed this speech. The delegations from Northern and Eastern Europe were especially vocal, but there was support from Germany and Hungary too.

“Three Champions will be chosen per school, with each of the initial contestants being granted ten possible replacements.”

The smiles diminished in intensity. The elites present in the great conference wanted some spectacle and action as an alternative to a war. They didn’t want a real butchery and if you began to count the casualties by the dozens, the word ‘massacre’ was going to describe perfectly the aftermath.

“The First Task will be a Survival Contest in the Wyrm Plains of Northern Sweden. The participants will have to fight their challengers and several hungry creatures to reach safety...”

The enthusiasm fell really quickly in the room. The Wyrm Plains were an infamous area of wilderness crowded by XXXXX-class creatures. The biggest creatures of this place were a combination of fangs, claws, poison, stings, and who knew what else. If they sent twelve Champions for a day of trial, they would be lucky to have one or two survivors. Save the new Basilisk-Slayer, he didn’t think any wizard or witch of Hogwarts had the potential to fight off the first beast which would prey upon them.

By the heavy silence, a lot of his fellow diplomats thought the same thing. Karkaroff had gone too far this time. And after he presented the second trial as a ‘poison/counter-poison challenge’, the cheers were non-existent. The third task was a free-duel tournament...with absolutely no restrictions. In other words, the Durmstrang students would enter this fight with their arsenal of Dark Curses and their worst creations. The British seventh-years would be annihilated if they dared enter the duel arena. Fourth task was Curse-breaking challenge in a replica of an Egyptian tomb. It was better to prepare for an eighty percent rate of fatalities for this one.

There was consternation on dozens of visages now. Giving a ridiculous reward was bad, but awarding a fantastic sum with the assurance you were not going to survive this contest unless you were the reincarnation of Merlin...it killed the mood. Students were young, wild, and believed themselves to be invincible, but they were not totally stupid. The hosting school had roughly between seven and nine months to manage the tasks. With twelve trials, Durmstrang affirmed these twelve lethal tasks would not deserve an entire month of recovery and healing. Except Karkaroff’s own students, few of the other foreign schools would volunteer and by the sixth task, Lucius didn’t think there would be enough teenagers left.

“And the twelfth trial will be an obstacle course within the walls of Durmstrang...”

Duelling, Potion-creation, Quidditch, and Spell-Crafting competitions were evoked for the rest of the non-champions, but after this litany of horrors and impossible trials the ICW and non-ICW delegates were sufficiently demoralised and most stayed silent.

They had come for a Tournament Proposal, not for a festival of death and something looking like the demented experiments of the Dark Lord Grindelwald and his lieutenants.

It was hard to say which proposition they liked the least: poor and unimaginative Hogwarts, or rich and suicidal Durmstrang. It was a good thing they were two other schools left before it was time to vote.

The moment the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina took the stage, Lucius raised his Occlumency shields again and forced his concentration to remain on the upcoming Tournament and only this topic. He had a beautiful wife he loved. He had seen hundreds of beautiful women in his life. As an influential Lord and a wealthy investor, legally or illegally, the head of House Malfoy was always invited at the great events. As the pure-blood of renown came with their wives, mistresses, concubines, servants, or prostitutes who were paid cash on the nail to be their night’s escort, Lord Lucius Malfoy had watched since Hogwarts thousands of beautiful women.

He could say safely Angelica Sforza, Headmistress of the Scuola Regina, was beating all of them without even trying. Even Stella Zabini, the infamous Black Widow of Europe, was underwhelming once you had seen her. But then Angelica Sforza was not human. The Princely House of Sforza had been one of the first Houses to denounce the weakening of the magical lines...and the solution they had found in the 1830s had created a continent-shattering scandal at the time. Indeed, the old Lord Sforza had married a Succubus and financed a crossbreeding program for his children to receive the better traits of the two species.

Needless to say, hundreds of Houses had turned their back on the Sforza family at the time. Their only saving grace had been the fact that first, the children of House Sforza had lived through the ‘experiment’ and secondly, the Sforza had been controlling a powerful trade empire no one could ignore. But year after year, the opinions had changed. Pure-bloods were becoming less and less powerful for diverse reasons; while House Sforza’s new generations were Lord-level Incubuses or Lady-level Succubi.

After the Grindelwald’s War, the massacre of the European aristocracy and the obliteration of thousands of pure-blood lines had pushed many survivors to follow on the Sforza path. Not with Succubi – England was not the only ICW-affiliated country which hunted a succubus if it set a foot on their soil. It was, in his opinion, a disgrace and not better than cavorting with beasts, but alas there was no denying the new methods were bringing a lot of fresh blood and new abilities at a time it was sorely needed.

Angelica Sforza began to speak. Her voice was enrapturing, as befitting for a Succubus. In her red robe, she attracted attention to a level which made Dumbledore feel like an amateur. Several times, he had to pinch himself to force his Occlumency back as the rapturous voice was sucking his determination. There was no denying the woman was extremely dangerous. If being a Succubus – or a half-succubus, Lucius didn’t know the percentage of human blood in her veins – wasn’t enough, the Sforza witch owned a commercial empire controlling immense properties, firms, lands, and innovation rights all over Venice, Italy, Illyria, Sicily, and Corsica-Sardinia. She was easily the wealthiest woman of the Italian peninsula and in the top ten of the continental fortunes. She had also the appearance of a twenty years-old witch when she was actually past sixty.

“Our proposal for this magnificent Tournament is a series of seven tasks, with four participants per school. Each Champion chosen during the Welcoming Ceremony will be granted the right to designate four potential replacements, who will participate in the next trials if he dies or suffers a crippling injury. The tasks...”

The images animated by her wand were spectacular and clearly calculated beforehand to raise the maximum of publicity. Their Coliseum look-alike was a genial thing of course. Everywhere in the audience, he could hear whispers and cheers of approval.

“Ninety percent of the infrastructure is already built and has been confirmed to be of the highest quality by ICW-appointed Ward-Masters and Curse-Breakers,” affirmed modestly the Succubus. “In the case of unwanted information leaks to the Champions, the Scuola Regina has the Artificers and the Enchanters available to modify the Trial without a day of delay and an alteration of the difficulty. Our Trial sites are large and will include new devices to improve the quality of the spectacle for the wizards and witches coming to visit us. For the First Trial alone, we plan to sell sixty thousand tickets and three thousand seats will be reserved to the students of the four participating schools.”

Hogwarts chances after the next fifteen minutes went from ‘very low’ to ‘non-existent’. There was no doubt Angelica Sforza had come prepared with the next best thing to perfection. The Trials were hard and dangerous; in fact he would be really surprised if they didn’t lose one or two students per challenge. But as the Headmistress reminded them herself, the pride of the wizards and witches was going to compete in this Tournament and she wasn’t going to make it a riskless competition. Furthermore, there was one Great Trial per month. Unless the wounds of a wizard were terrible, there was largely enough time to recover and prepare.

That didn’t mean he was going to give Draco the authorisation to participate.

“There will be ten events to increase the cooperation and allow more students to write their own stories in this extraordinary inter-school event. We can confirm at this date two Balls, our traditional Carnival, a Quidditch Tournament sponsored by the star-players of the next Quidditch World Cup, a Duelling Competition, and over twenty renowned Masters agreeing for half a week of exhibitions and preliminary Apprenticeships.”

This was official; the ‘Triwizard Tournament’ imagined by Dumbledore was not going to take place either at Hogwarts or at Durmstrang.

“Ten impartial judges selected by the ICW will grade the efforts of the Champions during each task. When the seven Trials will be completed, the Champions of the School who will have achieved first place will share one hundred thousand Galleons. The Victor of the Tournament will earn one hundred thousand Galleons too. There will be other rewards: the winner of a Trial gains a thousand Galleons and other advantages.”

Several minutes later when the Headmistress ended her discourse with a bright animation of her school in the background, a torrent of applauses and approval acclaimed her. Lucius applauded too, staying calm thanks to his Occlumency. The Tournament Sforza had described looked like the place where the power-makers of Europe were going to be gathered for the 1994-1995 school year. It was simply unconscionable he missed it.

Fourth and last to come present her version of the Tournament, Headmistress Maxime was the complete opposite of Sforza, massive and heavy. It was deeply ironic that the woman was also the result of a crossbreeding experiment. No Succubus blood for the French witch however, in her case it was obvious someone had used magic to create a half-human, half-giant hybrid like the bulky oaf Dumbledore kept in a hut at Hogwarts.

“Honoured wizards and witches, it is Beauxbatons’ greatest pleasure to present a proposal destined to underline the knowledge and the prestige of our great schools...”

Maxime had an advantage: she was speaking in her native language unlike Dumbledore, Karkaroff, and Sforza. Unfortunately for the giant hybrid, it was not a sizeable one. Dumbledore was an experimented politician and had long mastered French, no matter how loudly and vocally he caricatured his accent in front of his isolationist supporters. Sforza had spoken with a small accent, but it was mostly negligible. The only one who had really suffered in the diplomatic language was Karkaroff: his accent had butchered entire sentences and given a new layer of rudeness to his speech.

The rest was fairly classical as like every school before them, Beauxbatons had to describe their project. Like the Scuola Regina, Headmistress Maxime had decided creating a moderate number of trials was the best path and her proposal had eight Trials. There was, however, far more participants per school and they would participate as a team and win or lose together. Seven Champions would be chosen for each school, with one single replacement authorised.

Naturally, he could hear the grumbling from Durmstrang alumni, who prided themselves on their individual capabilities. They were not the only ones. Dumbledore too was looking displeased at the notion of a team for Hogwarts. It was not without reason, of course. Lucius had enough sources inside the school to know Gryffindors and Slytherins working together was going to be hard. And a group of teenage wizards and witches was difficult to sell in the newspapers as the work of a lone saviour.

The tasks proposed by the hybrid were a level below the difficulty proposed by Sforza. On the one hand, they would have to take them together and it meant the weak would pay dearly for the holes in their education. The fights against random XXXX-class creatures, the Warding/Curse-Breaking contest, the Duellist Tournament, and the Taming Contest were not murderous like the Durmstrang Trials, but they could cause life-long crippling wounds. On the other hand, seven wizards and witches had far more magical power to use than a lone fighter.

The associated competitions of the Tournament were Beauxbatons strongest selling point. The images floating above the giant Headmistress’s head were well-done and the attractive landscapes of Southern France won largely over their dark Scottish and Scandinavian amateur creations. The French had thought about everything: Balls, music, sculpture, several traditional festivities, broom races, wand-creation contests, architecture challenges, and everything which could be possibly exist. By the looks of things, the other schools would have to come with half of their effectives if they wanted to participate in the different activities.

“The Honourable wizards and witches who will win this unforgettable tournament will receive a reward of three hundred thousand Galleons and several Beauxbatons-created artworks.”

It was not bad, but potentially it meant fourteen wizards and witches would have to divide between themselves this large pile of gold. The Beauxbatons creations were worth a lot – his purse was bleeding every time Narcissa wanted one – but for certain seventeen years-old students it was not attractive.

“Thank you, Honourable Delegates,” finished Olympe Maxime and on this the presentations ended. The Beauxbatons Headmistress received loud cheers and hundreds of applauses. It was somewhat inferior to the support Sforza had received, but it was far better than Hogwarts and Durmstrang.

Naturally, the ICW being the ICW and the diplomats ignoring the sense of the word ‘celerity’, it was only five hours later they were gathered once again for the great vote. One thousand wizards and witches cast their wands in the secret alcoves. The colour of the light they used told the enchanted device the school they choose for the great inter-school event of this century’s end: blue for Beauxbatons, red for Durmstrang, yellow for Hogwarts, and green for the Scuola Regina.

Two hours later, the results announced by the Luxembourg Minister were a large slap for Dumbledore and his friends.

“Five hundred and nine votes for the Scuola Regina, three hundred and twelve votes for Beauxbatons, one hundred and twenty-four votes for Durmstrang and fifty-five votes for Hogwarts,” was the loud announcement.

“Per the will of the hosting school, this noble inter-school event will be the European Magical Tournament!”

The Head of the House Malfoy had received little pleasant memories since his eviction from the Board of Governors last year...but the sour expression of Dumbledore’s visage was compensating everything.

**31 August 1993, Zabini Manor, England**

In this last day of August, the *Daily Prophet* was once again proving the differences between it and the rest of the European newspapers.

For the French, Swiss, Italian, and German newspapers delivered to Zabini Manor, the most important topic of the week was incontestably the nomination of the New Supreme Mugwump. And it was not illogical, after all these months where the ICW had been leaderless. Alexandra didn’t know exactly why the Peruvian Jorge Luis Flores had been chosen and the rest of the Russian, French, Transylvanian, African, and Australian candidates were not, but at least this void had been filled.

The *Daily Prophet* had graciously given the ICW Peruvian leader an article on page six, and it was not a large one at that. The two-thirds of page six supposedly informing the readers on ‘international events’ were an absolutely unbiased journalist lambasting the Swiss and about every foreign nation for having the temerity to not reinstate Dumbledore immediately. The reason for this proposal: Grindelwald was at large and Dumbledore was the only one who could vanquish him.

It would be hilarious if the journalist had not been speaking seriously.

What was on page one and two if the ICW was utterly ignored by the Ministry-owned propaganda rag? The answer was depressing. Aside from the various advertisements and public events, the nebulous sighting of Bellatrix Black near Liverpool was taking the headlines. She used the world ‘nebulous’ because the key witness was nearly dead-drunk and the non-magical witnesses saw nothing abnormal.

But the Daily Prophet was clearly trying to be sensational before the return to Hogwarts and the end of summer. On page two, the Ministry proclaimed a ‘glorious victory’ against the countless armies of wererats. According to the viper-tongued journalist Rita Skeeter, a huge ‘battalion’ of four wererats had been slaughtered by over sixty Aurors.

It went without saying that on each page, the Ministry insisted they were totally in control, the lives of the wizards and witches of Britain were respected and blah, blah, blah...

“If the population believe these absurdities, it’s no wonder Dark Lords can pose a legitimate threat to the Ministry,” the green-eyed witch commented to Blaise before returning to her breakfast.

“The Ministry is not in their best shape,” admitted the black-skinned boy. “Mother says they are trying to arrest the Death Eaters and finish the were-beings before the world begins to look at us for the Quidditch World Cup next June.”

Ah yes, she had almost forgotten the sixteen best Quidditch teams of the world were going to perform on British soil in over nine months. Well, the fifteen best teams and the hosting nation which happened to be England. According to ancient players, the team England was going to field happened to be extremely weak and unpatriotic, even by English standards. Their last exhibition matches had been catastrophic routs. But then what could you expect when the Ministry and the Wizengamot decided to make four teams compete on the world stage? There were talented Quidditch players in the British Isles. There weren’t enough of them however to field four great teams. Ireland had built a great team, Scotland and Wales had attracted the good and the average; as for England...well, they had the rest and several powerful patrons competed to control their moves and their equipment contracts. Consequently, England’s Quidditch team’s future was not looking bright.

“Fudge and his supporters want to receive a new mandate when the 1995 election will come.”

Alexandra took a few seconds to finish her orange juice before snorting.

“He won’t have my vote. The more I listen to him talk, the less I am convinced the moron knows what he is doing. Sending Dementors to patrol around Hogwarts was bad, but it is one of the many idiocies he ordered. Plus his clothes and his speeches are sheer nonsense.”

“Yes, but who do you want to take his place?” demanded the Slytherin. “Assuming a motion of no-confidence got us rid of him, there’s no great candidate which would unite the Light, Grey, and Dark factions. The Wizengamot would enter another year of total stalemate, the Department Heads would be left unsupervised and nothing would change. And at the end of it, a wizard like Fudge will be chosen because the Old Houses won’t want a powerful and charismatic leader giving them orders.”

The Potter Heiress grimaced but didn’t reply. What Blaise had said was bearing the mark of the truth. The Wizengamot and the Ministry had become stagnant institutions determined to enforce the status quo at all costs and nothing innovative had been done in years if you excluded festivities, celebrations, and sport events.

“You have a point but the people Fudge placed at the *Daily Prophet* are dangerous. They say, and I quote: ‘if you see a Dementor taking aggressive actions, you must immediately call the Auror office and prepare some chocolate to fight the after-effects of the exposure’.” Alexandra threw the offending newspaper in Blaise’s direction. “If the Dementors want to suck your soul, that’s going to be really useful!”

“The Ministry doesn’t want wizards and witches to get ideas above their station,” commented Stella Zabini, who as usual had arrived without warning - there had to be sound-deafening Charms on her heels, it was impossible otherwise – and was wearing long Wizengamot robes that unlike the poor Umbridge woman, she still managed to wear like a robe from a great dressmaker.

“The spells commonly used to repulse the Dementors are either Light or Dark, and requires emotion channelling to activate them. It is not illegal to know them, but the DMLE takes note each year at the OWLS and NEWTS exams the Hogwarts students who are able to cast them. The war-spells to cause lasting damage to these demons...they are illegal in Britain.”

The more Alexandra thought about it, the more the Ministry and Dumbledore had in common. Both wanted to restrict esoteric and powerful forms of magic.

“But you know them?” Alexandra didn’t trust Fudge’s assertion the students would be perfectly safe. Last year, he had gotten rid of Dumbledore, imprisoned Hagrid, and let Malfoy have free reign because according to words spread from the Golden Trio ‘the Ministry had to be seen doing something’. It was cold comfort for the poor children which would have their lives ended if it turned badly.

“I know them,” confirmed her magical guardian. “But I don’t think it will be useful at your age. Patronus and Ecclesial are truthfully late sixth-year spells and demand consummate effort to learn. And they’re extremely magical intensive. Using them once or twice will likely deplete most of your magical core and weaken you physically. Like Occlumency – the defence of the mind – they can be useful defences against the Dementors, Vampires, and Lethifolds...but they were invented for adult wizards, not children.”

The Lady of the Most Noble House of Zabini watched the golden clock above the fireplace she used for Floo travel.

“We will talk about it a bit this evening, but the basic is that the Patronus conjures a magical guardian shaped like an animal fuelled by Light Magic and the Ecclesial does the same with Dark Magic. The spells can only force away creatures like Dementors and the species I have just named, so the Ministry has not banned them. Depending on your alignment, you can only use one or the other. The Patronus is channelled with memories of happiness while the Ecclesial demands wrath and determination from its caster. *Furorem Ecclesiam*!”

A powerful column of black light flashed out of Stella Zabini’s wand and something looking like a big snake came out before being sent to the four corners of the hall at the speed of a competition broom. The flames of the Floo flashed green and Lady Zabini was gone.

Blaise, on the other hand, was looking at her weirdly.

“Do I have a large a spot on my forehead?” The future Ravenclaw third-year said in a loud voice.

“You’re going to learn the spells on your own, aren’t you?” it came out more like an affirmation than a question in the mouth of the Zabini’s Heir.

“Possibly,” she answered when in truth, she thought ‘yes’. “I don’t think Dementors are vulnerable to sword-inflicted wounds...”

Basilisks had proven vulnerable to Fragarach, so in theory Alexandra should be able to kill everything living on this planet with her weapon. But that was the problem. From the images of the newspapers, it was extremely likely Dementors weren’t living in the conventional sense of the term.

But sincerely, learning Dark Magic was a step Alexandra was not sure she could take. Most of the impartial books she had read in the Zabini library agreed studying and practising Dark spells did not make you insane...but there were always people corrupted and changed by it every generation.

At thirteen years old, she was young. Champion of the Morrigan or not, Alexandra didn’t want to walk on a dangerous path only to regret it weeks later when she couldn’t face her image in a mirror without throwing up.

“Good luck, I think you will need it,” said Blaise as he stood up and left the room, leaving a House Elf to disappear what had not been devoured. “Patronus are extremely hard and House Potter may be a powerful Light House, but I don’t think you will be able to achieve it without a teacher to help you.”

Alexandra watched him go deeply amused. Why were people so ready to admit she was Light when all recent incidents at Hogwarts pointed to the opposite possibility?

“I suppose people are always going to believe what they want to believe.” She didn’t say more as the walls – and the portraits – had ears in this place. “Now next destination, the library...”

**1 September 1993, King’s Cross Station, London, England**

This summer of 1993 had been rich in surprises, good and bad, but it was over. It was September 1, and like the last two years, the date was synonymous with ‘travel to King’s Cross and take the Hogwarts Express’.

Overall, this summer had not been a waste of time. She had spent time at MacDougal Manor, got rid of the Dursleys, recruited some minions, learned Gaelic, and began to learn French too. Dumbledore had lost whatever influence the old meddler had on her after the Basilisk affair. The Zonko shares James Potter had bought for a reason which still escaped her had been sold for twenty-five Galleons and been transferred to Vault 7043, Paris-Gringotts branch.

But there had been bad news too. As the Potter Heiress, most of her prestige from killing two Basilisks had disappeared like smoke on a windy day after Azkaban and her father’s escape. The Ministry of her country was completely unable to do anything more complicated than arresting a centenarian witch. And she now had to fight her new guardian’s attempts to give her a mountain of clothes.

This last point would be fought to the death, Alexandra swore.

“I don’t need a second trunk,” the Ravenclaw witch affirmed vigorously when she saw the dresses, the skirts and the shoes beginning to accumulate at eight in the morning. By the Morrigan, the bedroom she had been given was large – a non-magical king would certainly have raised no objection to sleeping there - but Lady Zabini had begun filling it with a scary enthusiasm.

“Of course, you do Alexandra,” the reply was said in a tone which made her wonder if it was not preferable to challenge Dumbledore in a grand duel rather than face her guardian. “It is completely unsatisfactory if a young Heiress of your status hasn’t the clothes befitting her status.”

Alexandra didn’t think even Daphne Greengrass had that many clothes...although to be honest, she hadn’t bothered to ponder on this issue during her first two years. Then there was the problem that with magical-expanded trunk, the size outside did not give you clues on what was inside.

Take the second trunk Lady Zabini had brought into her bedroom after multiplying by three the initial amount of space her first trunk could carry, for example. Aside from the little fact it was Ravenclaw-blue and had a sapphire over its large lock, it was the right size to open a clothes shop in its depth.

And Stella Zabini had begun with a complex animation charm transferring the content of the wardrobes to the trunk before the first protest had been shouted from her mouth. There had to be a set of Hogwarts robes, underwear, socks, shoes and nightwear for each day from September 1 to the Christmas Holidays. By the One Ring, every girl from Slytherin dungeons to the Gryffindor tower was either going to mock or to murder her!

“I don’t need to take a different set of clothes for each time of the year!”

This was apparently the wrong thing to do as a snake-like glare was sent her way and over fifty nightdresses she wouldn’t wear alone if her life depended on it were installed in a rear-compartment.

“You will,” said her guardian in a voice which broke no interruption. “And I will demand Blaise to tell me if you follow my clothing instructions, so pay attention.”

The blue trunk was closed and she was handed the three silver keys opening it. Two House Elves appeared and seized the trunks before disappearing a few seconds later, preventing any ‘accident’ between here and King’s Cross.

Meagre consolation, she had avoided the heels today and as they walked to the entrance of Zabini Manor, she was in a nice pair of comfortable boots. How much they had cost, Alexandra tried very hard not to think about.

“You may receive ball invitations while you are at Hogwarts,” said the black-haired ‘Black Widow’ as they descended a large series of stairs guarded by twenty pristine suits of armour and the noise of their footsteps was muted by a magnificent green carpet. “If so, warn me and I will rent a room at Hogsmeade to discuss your plans for winter.”

Alexandra blinked before replying hesitantly.

“I don’t think Fudge and the rest of his Ministry are my biggest fans...surely they won’t want to invite me to one of the greatest events they organise?”

“It’s indeed unlikely anyone British will risk inviting you,” agreed Stella Zabini. “Although don’t stop considering the possibility. Fudge and his circle are politicians above all else. If it becomes suddenly acceptable to invite you because the Azkaban prisoners are all captured and he needs some votes for a new law, Fudge will do it in a heartbeat. Our dear Minister would sell his wife if it could earn him a second term and gold-filled pockets.”

For some reason, she didn’t think Fudge had been a Hufflepuff in the light of this judgement.

“But Britain is not the centre of the world and there are always great winter balls on the continent,” continued Lady Zabini. “Many will ignore the words of the *Daily Prophet* and remember you are the sole and only Basilisk-slayer of Europe. This gives you a prestige no one else at Hogwarts save Dumbledore can match.”

“Err...sure, but I don’t want to be the only teenager in the middle of an adult crowd,” in all honesty she would prefer be far, far away from this agitation, but this might prove unadvisable to say to her magical guardian.

“Oh, I think there will be other young adults no matter where you are invited,” was the final comment. “There are rumours of inter-school competitions all over and I think various Ministers or their money-backers will be really happy to present you for your debut in high society.”

And just like that, Alexandra could already see the expensive dresses, the heels, and the cosmetic products running at her. Would it be rude to stay cowardly at Hogwarts during the two weeks of winter holidays?

When she and Blaise advanced in the Floo, she was still brainstorming on it.

A few minutes later though, her main preoccupation became trying to reach the Hogwarts Express. They had only arrived fifteen minutes before the train’s departure, and the famous platform nine and three quarters was crowded. Maybe it was her imagination, but there looked to be more people than the previous years. But with all the owls, cats, and pets in their cages, the hundreds of trunks and the uncountable families, it was rather difficult to be sure.

After several minutes of excuses and detours, she gave her goodbye to Lady Zabini and went aboard the Hogwarts Express. The two trunks were levitated before her; given the amount of clothes and other things in them, she was not going to bother with her arms. Even a charm decreasing the weight of her luggage was not sufficient when there was enough loaded in them to tire an elephant.

Fortunately, she had not long to search to find her friends. The second compartment she drew near was the one where the recognisable bushy hair of Hermione Granger could be seen.

“Hello, Exiled, your beloved leader is...”

She did not finish the sentence. On the left side of the compartment were Hermione, Lyre, and Luna Lovegood. In other times, the Potter Heiress would have been surprised at the presence of the latter two: Lyre was their friend, but directly joining them aboard the Hogwarts Express was a big risk for her. Luna Lovegood was even more surprising: it had taken a lot of letters from Nigel to receive the basic information to create their own newspaper.

But at this moment, this was a very tertiary preoccupation.

For on the other side of the compartment, Morag had drawn Claiomh Solais, the ancestral sword she had taken for their little excursion in wererat country, and had placed it against the neck of a girl which could be none other than Scylla Yaxley.

“Alexandra, we have a big problem...”

**Author’s note**: The summer chapters of 1993 end there, I’m afraid. Now all aboard the Hogwarts Express for new adventures! I can promise the journey to Hogwarts is going to be a lot of things, but certainly not boring...

As always, constructive reviews and propositions are welcome from my lovely minions, err I mean my great and addicted readers.

Links for the story:

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