**Chapter 62**

**Ultimatum**

**9 November 1993, Nantes, France**

James Potter woke up.

It was strange, because he didn’t remember falling asleep.

But the room he had been granted by the French wizards was still in the darkness...and why were his thoughts so clear right now?

He felt...far better than he had for the first time in months! It was like the souvenir of the Dementor aura had no hold on him anymore!

Despite the bedroom having no enchanted lights lit, the reason for this absence of problems was easy to notice. The golden medallion placed around his neck shone in sort of reddish halo, absorbing from time to time a sparkle or two of black-coloured magic.

“What is this thing?”

“They call the set the Medallions of Folly,” came out from the shadows a voice he recognised without effort. “It is a very basic but powerful combination of Blood and Mind Magic. The mental afflictions of the first person who wears one of these talismans are transferred the wearer of the second medallion and vice-versa. Of course, the medallions need to be...prepared beforehand in human’s blood, unwillingly given. And they don’t last for more than twenty-four hours.”

The moonless night of the hospital room turned brighter. It was just a step above penumbra, not enough to be considered close to dawn or to sunset...maybe a half-twilight? But it was neat, and he couldn’t miss the woman who was barely three metres away from him, standing immobile like a statue.

“Lily?” The bright green eyes, the visage, the style...it was her...but there was something wrong. It was after three seconds he realised she wasn’t moving a finger. She wasn’t breathing. No, this was...

“Hello, James.” The smile he was given was full of teeth that not even Sirius had in his Animagus form. “It’s been far too long.”

The former Lord of House Potter tried to stand and scream for the help of the hospital’s personnel. But no words came out of his mouth and a wordless spell later, he was leaning against the wall, tied by invisible ropes.

“Nobody will interrupt our conversation. I made sure of this before waking you up.”

The subtle lessening of pressure against his throat informed him he could speak again.

“You are a vampire,” he gasped.

The creature which had been his wife raised her eyes to the ceiling and showed for the first time an emotion. To his astonishment, it was irritation.

“Why did I accept the proposal of this stupid Hat to sort me into Gryffindor House? Yes James, I am a vampire now. Your sense of observation is truly without equal on this planet. Your intelligence is...maybe a hundredth of what is expected of a fifth-year Ravenclaw. Have you finished your useless remarks or should I prepare myself for more shocking revelations?”

“You are a monster.” Even knowing his wife had practised from time to time forbidden magics, James couldn’t believe she had agreed to be become a Dark Creature. “Go away. We have nothing to say to each other.”

“I disagree.” The eyes flashed in a worrying explosion of green, and the female vampire hissed something in a guttural tongue. An instant later, there was...something pressing against his arms and his legs. “In fact, I completely disagree to a degree you can’t possibly begin to imagine, James Potter. What did I say to you on August 4, 1981?”

The inhuman voice was so cold, so threatening, it gave him shivers and filled him with fear. It was not difficult to remember the conversation in question. It had not been a pleasant memory, and so the Dementors had not removed him from his mind or fractured him beyond recognition.

“You said...you said our daughter was your most precious thing on this earth. That if something happened to Alexandra while I was supposed to protect her...you...you would make sure I regretted it, even if it’s the last thing you ever do.”

The smile which bloomed on the pale visage of Lily was one of the most frightening things he had ever seen in his life.

“One of the rare things I was relatively confident when I was in limbo was that my daughter was safe.” The vampire snarled. “In spite of all the problems our marriage had experienced, I was sure my dear husband would not shirk his father’s duties and raise our daughter until I was resurrected.”

Eyes as merciless as the Killing Curse stared at him and James could not help but made a small sound of whimpering with his mouth.

“Imagine when I am once again walking the surface of this planet...my husband didn’t raise the flesh of my flesh, the blood of my blood. He didn’t even rush to Godric’s Hollow after the battle to bury me or check if our daughter was fine. No, like a coward and an imbecile he abandoned all his duties and managed to be convicted as one of the most infamous traitors of the British Isles. Worse, before fleeing he didn’t even check if the contingencies’ plans we had put in place for our daughter were still possible. You might think the death of Frank and Alice Longbottom would have already told him that something was not working correctly in the Order, but the poor Gryffindor was not exactly gifted with genius-level intelligence.”

For a second or two, he watched her visage and at last he realised this was really the human part of Lily which was speaking, not the vampire she had become. And all he saw from her was pure, undiluted, raw human hatred.

“Lily, I...I was trying to prevent the Prophecy of Camlann from coming to fruition. Alexandra is one of the potentials, thank to this ill-thought ritual you did...”

“Well, that worked superbly, didn’t it?” The snarl of his dead wife cut him. “The Prophecy of Camlann is now active. Along with the Prophecy linking the fates of Voldemort and Neville Longbottom together. Your efforts have all been for...nothing. And. You. Abandoned. My. Daughter.”

“I trusted Dumbledore...” the excuse sounded weak to his ears, and the pressure increased on the ropes and the things...crawling all over him.

“Ah yes, the Headmaster. The man who is so busy with a dozen political positions and leads gloriously the Order of the Phoenix when it is convenient for him and his schedule allows him to. The Chief Warlock who was supposed to make sure all the Death Eaters and their financial supporters made their way directly to Azkaban. You know, in hindsight, I don’t see what he has apart from his magical power. His philosophy is outdated and doesn’t work, his motivations are highly suspicious...”

“He is a far better person you will ever be.” James replied. “At least he didn’t fall so low to become a creature of the Dark and sell his soul to a group of Dar Lords and Ladies.”

She just shook her head in disbelief.

“I could tell you stories about Dumbledore which would torment him for uncountable nights to come. Did he tell you that until this Samhain, he believed he had killed his sister in a three way-duel with Grindelwald and his own brother?”

“You lie.” This had to be a lie, surely.

“Whatever helps you live with your failures,” the wand in her hand was raised, and some of the binding sensations disappeared.

“Petunia. He sent our daughter to Petunia. I had expressly told everyone I knew I wanted Alexandra nowhere near my odious sister and her whale of a husband. At least our daughter has not to breathe the same vitiated air of these pigs ever again.”

“You are a Muggle-born, I will remind you.” Had she gone that dark in 1981? How hadn’t he noticed it?

“I am perfectly aware of who I am, James Potter, unworthy husband.” A magical slap struck his right cheek. “I do not hate my sister and her husband because they are Muggles. I hate them because there is nothing remotely good in their flesh, skulls, and souls. I hate them because they tormented my daughter for years and years without remorse. But don’t worry, I have decided to give them a taste of their own medicine.”

“What have you done?” He regretted by advance what he was going to learn, and the vindictive expression of vampire-Lily didn’t disappoint.

“I threw a nasty curse on them. Now every prison inmate, every guardian, every judge, and every person they are susceptible to meet in this prison will experiment...a variety of extreme feelings randomly wherever they are close to them. It might be loathing, it might be wrath, it might be nausea...things like that.”

“You are completely mad. Whatever did these Muggles did to our daughter...”

The second slap was so violent he realised seconds later he had bit his tongue when he felt the taste of blood in his mouth.

“You weren’t there. You didn’t bother to check. You. Abandoned. Our. Daughter.”

Something seized his throat and for a moment, he thought this was the end, as he fought to breathe. At last it ended, but damn it hurt...

“I was at Azkaban,” he defended himself. “I couldn’t exactly...”

“Did you rush to whatever place she could possible live in when you escaped Azkaban? Did you truly travel across the Isles to find where she was enjoying her holidays? Did you truly care what she had become apart from your little butterfly in the game of prophecies and Fate?”

The third slap was more given as an afterthought than an expression of anger.

“We are the parents of Alexandra Potter. By custom and by human decency, we are supposed to die for her.” There were a few seconds of silence. “I did die for her, and I am regretting every moment not to have been stronger. What’s your excuse, James?”

“You went on a path I couldn’t follow you.” He admitted. “Your little pacts in the dark, you attempt to meddle with the Dark...you were going to lead Britain to ruin and destruction.”

He wanted to know if the vampire had a tiny shard of remorse in her. Bust she burst into laughter, and a long one at that.

“Ah, I needed that,” Lily finished chuckling. “James, have you read the newspapers these last days? Britain doesn’t need me or the Exchequer to burn itself to the ground. It’s a country led by weaklings, cowards, hypocrites, and the only powerful wizard in power, a certain Albus Dumbledore, is the source of dozens of problems plaguing the society of Wizarding Britain.”

He wanted to utter his denial, but she didn’t give him the time.

“Take for example Enchanting, one of my greatest strengths. Now, it’s not exactly like Wizarding Britain has an extreme need of us.” The venom of her voice had returned, more acidic than ever. “After all the Aurors need someone to enchant their dragon armours if they want to have something which will last more than two skirmishes with a drunk smuggler. They need Invisibility Cloaks if they want to be able to listen to illegal dealings to dismantle illegal organisations. They have need of Enchanters if they want library books to be routinely updated and protected from magical fires and other types of disasters.”

James closed his mouth. Much as he wanted to tell her she was wrong, he couldn’t. Enchanters – or in her case, Enchantresses – were highly valuable assets for a Wizarding community or government.

“Now, in 1945, there were thirty-eight Enchanters or Enchantresses living on British soil. It was already an insufficient number, by the way. By 1977, between the bigotry of the government, the general failings of the ‘educational reforms’ championed by Dumbledore and a few more economic downturns, there were only fifteen of them left. By 1981, and the end of the war, I had officially my Mastery in Enchanting, but six Enchanters were dead due to the war, and Stella Zabini and two others had fled overseas, which was now that I think about it the very smart thing to do.”

A familiar spell saw him levitating feet above his head, and the feelings of being entirely at the mercy of the creature had once called his love returned at lightning’s speed.

“Now, Stella returned to Britain...eventually. But she’s specialised in jewellery enchanting, murdering her husbands, and amassing prestige and wealth wherever she can. She’s not someone the Ministry really wants to work with. So Fudge and his lackeys began to force the Masters and Mistresses of this field to train their successors. The wizards and witches which followed had of course to be pure-bloods of the noblest lines...and because even with good teachers these inbred imbeciles can’t be trusted to achieve that, they relaxed the rules.”

The green eyes watched him like he was the prey. He was trying to tell himself that being an Animagus nullified the bloodthirst of a vampire towards you, but...

“The Mastery my Mistress allowed me to try in 1980 was done by ICW standards, which are...exacting. I succeeded, but it was by no means an easy accomplishment. And I still have hundreds of hours of lots and practise to learn before she considers me half-competent in the field of Advanced Enchanting.”

The mouth was open, letting him see there was plenty of blood on her teeth. She had fed recently...

“The standards established by Britain were already collapsing in 1977. Now we’re in 1993, and while there are officially thirty-two Mastery-level Enchanters and Enchantresses in Britain...the only four or five which are really worth something are those who acquired their Mastery on foreign shores. The parchment the British government hands out is not worth the ink used for the certification. No grand plan of Voldemort or the Exchequer did this. No evil conspiracy or Dark Curse caused you to fell into mediocrity. Britain is getting weaker and weaker...and its government and its so-called Light did it alone.”

“You are trying to justify to me why you joined the Exchequer. Be honest in your...”

A claw-hand seized his throat, and for the first time they touched. She was cold, oh by Merlin, she was deathly cold...

“Honesty?” The hiss hurt his ears. “You want honesty? Fine, I will give you honesty. The very reason I went overseas for my Apprenticeship is because, while I am by far ten times more skilled and intelligent than your average pure-blood, all doors were closed to me by virtue of my birth.”

“That’s...a...lie...” finally she released him and he was able to breathe normally. “I know Slughorn was ready to take you as Apprentice for your Potions Mastery...”

“Yes, he was.” The smirk he was handed out was full of anger. “And let’s insist on the ‘was’ James. With Dumbledore firing him after 1977 for one of his favourites, Horace was unable to take me as an Apprentice immediately. He had to regularise his situation to the Guild, fight the rumours Dumbledore had spread on his name, and return to the Potions’ selling business. He promised me he would gladly teach me before 1983 arrived...and gave me access to plenty of his connections, including those he had on the continent.”

“Slughorn?” just when he thought the situation couldn’t get worse, it did. “He is a member of the Exchequer?”

The look he was given was one reserved usually to particularly dim-witted children.

“I see why Gryffindors are always on the losing side of wars. What are they putting in our drinks at breakfast?”

“Hey!”

“Yes James, Horace Slughorn is a member of the Exchequer. I don’t know his rank. I have never met him in his Exchequer persona, only in teacher-student informal conversations.”

“But...he’s...” the Potions Master was certainly a plotter and a Slytherin, but his skills with a wand were particularly lacking. “He’s not a powerful Dark Wizard...”

“It just proves you lack good sense and have no skills at seeing the true self of wizard and witches which are in front of you. On the subject, you are truly in good company with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. Now where were we? Ah, yes.”

The word spiralled out of control, and suddenly he was back on his bed, unable to move.

“You abandoned our daughter, James Potter, and you did it at a moment you were sure I wouldn’t be around to punish you. For this unforgivable crime, you are going to die. Yet I am merciful. I know Alexandra has demanded an appointment to see you for the Winter Holidays. If she forgives you...I will think about sparing you. If she does not, the capsule of poison I hid in your body will make sure your demise will be atrociously long and painful.”

“I will warn the Healers...” and certainly the local Aurors after this was done.

“You will not. Every single of this conversation will stay between you and I.” A fist was tightened and he felt a horrible pain in his chest.

“You are a bloodsucking monster...”

“I prefer the ‘Blood Enchantress’ term...hum...maybe I should ask for it to become my new Exchequer name.”

His vision decreased as the darkness second after second engulfed everything.

“Make no mistake, James Potter. Our daughter may forgive you, but I will not. And if you try to raise one hand on Alexandra again, I will throw you to the Dementors myself. Oh, and the Medallions of Folly have a nasty side-effect when you remove them.”

Something clicked around his neck, and James Potter screamed in agony.

**9 November 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“You should have come to DADA, Alex. It was a disaster from start to finish.”

Alexandra abandoned her massive plate of sea food for an instant in order to answer.

“You realise this sentence makes sure I have less and less motivation to the DADA class room next time, right?” She exhaled loudly. “What was the problem this time?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Morag continued sarcastically. “Obviously, Professor Podmore thought that with Rincewind gone, he could return to ‘the true Ministry guidelines that will ensure you are properly prepared for your OWLs’.”

The Potter raised an eyebrow and groaned.

“Since we saw the village next door razed...nine days ago, was it? I think his priorities would be more focused on ensuring we survive the next two years to reach our exam room.”

“Me too,” Nigel declared while taking his seat and beginning to fill his plate with sausages and a great deal of vegetables. “But obviously the Junior Professor of DADA doesn’t share our opinion. In his mind, it was more intelligent to train us to fight Boggarts.”

Thank the Morrigan for the rumour mill, this time. She had directly gone to Flitwick in order to avoid an excuse to avoid this class. The third-years students of this class didn’t need to see her worst fear. Alexandra honesty didn’t know if it was the Summon of Brise-Roc or seeing all her friends die in front of her, but she had no intention to verify in front of crowd including people she didn’t trust at all.

“What went wrong this time?”

“Well, after Hermione won us twenty points by reciting the definition of the Boggart and the incantation to get rid of it...” Hermione two seats away tried very hard to not look too satisfied with herself, “Professor Podmore called Theodore Nott, and sure enough his worst fear was seeing his whole family dead. He screamed, he ran away, Professor Podmore first incantation missed the Boggart, the creature took the appearance of an Inferi when it came in front of Zacharias, there was more panic, more running, and when our so-wise teacher managed to calm half of the class, there were ten boys and girls bound for the Calming Draughts of Madam Pomfrey. And no don’t worry Alex, Susan is fine. Everyone is fine, in fact, the worst ones are Nott and Smith, and even they are more...seriously terrified than anything else.”

“Thank goodness,” she whispered in relief, before shaking her head. “What was Podmore thinking?”

“That I don’t know. Maybe he wanted to add his name to the long list of failures in the proud inheritance of the DADA class? I mean, he didn’t beat Lockhart Pixies’ lessons, but Lockhart wanted to be seen as a fraud, so at least he had an excuse.”

“It’s tempting to believe there is no DADA curse after this,” Hermione remarked. “If the Professors are more and more incompetent year after year, logically Dark Magic is not necessary to explain why no one manages to stay at the post more than one year.”

This was true, but the Arithmantic equations Rincewind had handed them as a last gift were really convincing. Now, neither Alexandra nor Hermione were advanced enough in the class to say if there were mistakes in the Butcher of Dresden’s work...but there was definitely something. Something was targeting the DADA position. It was weak for the moment, but it could increase in strength without warning. Maybe it was not a curse by the definition of the word, but the effect from an observer’s perspective was the same as one.

“I think there’s a curse, Hermione. There are coincidences, and then there is the DADA problem. I mean, by simple logic, even an incompetent teacher without a curse would have a chance to stay at his post. Assuming twenty to thirty percent of the teachers didn’t want to teach more than one year, that still leaves the seventy or eighty other percent. There’s no way every single year these aspirant teachers could be forced to flee the castle in disgrace, due to wounds, or for any other reason, not one hundred percent of them. There should have been exceptions.”

At least this year so far they had avoided the butchery of second year. Rincewind had left the castle with all his limbs, alive, and – relatively – sane. Alexandra couldn’t believe these were the standards she had to consider where Hogwarts was concerned, but there was no possibility to ignore the truth.

“I’m with Alexandra.” Nigel approved. “There’s a curse. Come on. Quirrell, dead. Devkins, dead. Lockhart was wounded, fired, and is now missing. Reed, dead. And Rincewind, fired. That makes three dead, one seriously injured, and one fired without any violence. And nobody has managed for decades to hold the position, it’s not just our class which has problems...

“Maybe the first class of Professor Rincewind was incredibly appropriate,” Hermione suggested half-heartedly. “Maybe we should all learn to flee quickly...”

“Maybe,” when everyone else was already doing it, was it really cowardice?

“Oh look,” she heard Padma tell Su Li five seats away. “The new Professor for DADA is here.”

More whispers echoed and the dozens of students already present in the Great Hall turned their heads to watch the Head Table. There was indeed a new visage among the teachers who had taken their seats a moment ago, and thanks to the newspapers and old photos she had searched in the last years, Alexandra recognised without effort Remus Lupin, on the right of Professor Vector.

Unavoidably, Albus Dumbledore was here to present him, though for the last four days he had not been present at noon.

“I know many of you awaited the arrival of our new DADA Professor with great impatience, and as such it is a pleasure to welcome to Hogwarts Professor Lupin, who has kindly consented to replace the post left vacant by Professor Rincewind.”

Alexandra didn’t know if the Headmaster had expected a torrent of applause, but there were just a few polite murmurs and cheers of approval, and they came from House Gryffindor. The rest of the students looked with disapproval. And with reason, in her opinion. The robes and the wand did not make the wizard, but Hogwarts was nonetheless a school for the elite of Britain, and its yearly fees were not cheap. Dumbledore manipulations or not, they were entitled to have people wearing correct clothes, not beggars. Remus Lupin looked gaunt and ill, with some faint scars on his face. Rincewind had already been very questionable in his clothes, but here it was breaking through the red line and becoming truly pathetic. Already there were angry murmurs from House Slytherin. For Lupin’s sake, she hoped he was a good teacher because otherwise there would be a lot of pressure to fire him before the end of December.

“The second announcement is more formal. As you must be aware by now, there will be an inter-school tournament next year organised between several of the great European schools. The official name of this continental competition is the European Magical Tournament.”

The murmurs and the whispers tripled in intensity in less time it took to say it.

“There is going to be a Winter Ball in less than a month, organised by the Scuola Regina, the Italian school which has been chosen to host this exceptional event. The location of this event where the key rules of the Tournament will be explained to you is the Hofburg Palace of Vienna.”

Alexandra couldn’t say she had heard of it, but by the excited giggles of Lavender, Parvati, and a few dozen other girls, this was very much a big deal.

After fifteen seconds, Dumbledore had to throw a few sparkles from his wand to demand the silence.

“I’m sure you are incredibly excited to go to this joyous gathering of wizard and witches. Unfortunately, there are four schools invited as well as many, many dignitaries from every Ministry of Europe and beyond, and while the Hofburg magical wings are vast, they can’t welcome everyone. I was informed yesterday there will only be forty students invited...”

A chorus of offended voices drowned whatever the Chief Warlock had been able to say, about sixty percent coming from the girl population of Hogwarts shouting their disappointment at the same time. It took a loud ‘boom’ from Dumbledore’s wand to restore a measure of calm.

“I’m sure you are disappointed,” said the old wizard in his usual grandfatherly voice, “but the conditions were approved by the ICW, and they are non-negotiable. Hogwarts was communicated a list of forty students which were invited to this Winter Ball, and five Professors will escort you on December 4 to make sure the honour of our school is upheld to the highest standards.”

The honour of the school may have been a bit trampled these last three years. Having your village next door attacked and almost totally destroyed by Light and Dark Wizards was not exactly of a nature prompt to reassure someone. Somehow, she didn’t believe Beauxbatons was announcing these ‘incidents’ every year.

Nonetheless, there was a lot of grumblings and protestations, and the Headmaster to use several times his wand before the calm was restored.

“I know many of you will be disappointed at the idea of missing this event, but it is a prelude to the more...prestigious festivities which will be organised during the European Magical Tournament. Now, the students which are invited will have an exceptional authorisation to use the thirteenth and twentieth of November for shopping purposes, under the condition they are in permanence accompanied by their guardians.”

A major-domo with flamboyant red and gold clothes came from a door and posed a large roll of parchment in front of Dumbledore.

“Thank you, Mr. Ali. I will insist on the fact representing Hogwarts at this Winter Ball for this pre-opening of the European Magical Tournament is a great honour and a duty you must not take lightly. Anyone who blemishes by his conduct the reputation of Hogwarts will face detentions and academic penalties for the rest of his years in this castle, I can give you my word on it. Now for the names of the students invited to Vienna.”

The roll must have been already given to him hours ago, because the moment it was opened, Dumbledore began to read and didn’t show a twinge of surprise or emotion.

“The forty students chosen to represent Hogwarts are: Head Boy Percival Weasley, Head Girl Penelope Clearwater, Alexandra Potter, Angelina Johnson...”

Percy Weasley swaggered like he had won an Olympic medal, before being reminded by the angry expression of Penelope that he had broken their relationship formally a week ago, and now had no real chance to take her to the ball.

In the mean time, Alexandra suddenly was really, really aware a lot of people were watching her not like she was a Dark Lady for once, but like a particularly appetising meal. Inside her heart, the hydra hissed in disapproval.

The list continued for a few minutes. Alexandra had to give it to the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina – which was certainly the one which had chosen the names to be invited – it was a far more neutral list than one Hogwarts would have chosen if the Board of Governors had been able to make its own choices. Tracey Davis, half-blood of Slytherin, had little chance to be chosen but she was on the list with Daphne. So were Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini, for the third-year Slytherins. The name of Hannah Abbot arrived to their ears. Not Susan, alas. Hermione and Morag were called one after the other.

Speaking of the names, all the ones which were announced were of boys and girls from third-years to sixth-years. Alexandra supposed that since the seventh-years were not going to compete unless they failed their NEWTs, there was no point inviting them. Neville Longbottom was called three names before the end. Then it was Cormac McLaggen, their Quidditch Captain Roger Davies, and last but not least, Cho Chang.

A rapid mental count and she was sure there were twenty boys and twenty girls invited for the Winter Ball.

It made her dread what was going to follow.

She was completely right to be prepared for the worst.

“Now, I’m afraid every student will have to find a partner for the Ball...”

This time, Double Defeater of Grindelwald or not, the words of Albus Dumbledore were lost in the chaos and the screams. The screams because naturally with over three hundred students in the Great Hall, having less than forty chosen left a great number of disappointed ball-addicts.

“Cho Chang, I know you want to come to the ball with me...”

SLAP! BANG!

“Ouch, that must hurts,” Morag commented with a grimace as Cho showed to demonstrate to Cormac McLaggen why his demand was completely inappropriate and insulting.

As the Gryffindor was dragged away by two of his friends in pain, Cedric Diggory advanced, placed a knee to the ground and made his demand.

“Cho, beautiful flower of Ravenclaw, please, will you agree to me my dance partner to the Winter Ball?”

The giggles coming from every table told them the demand from Cedric was going to be remembered for a long, long time.

“Yes, I will be your partner, Cedric.”

And suddenly, over nineteen boys – including Cormac McLaggen – grimaced and sobbed.

“Annnnggeeelllinnnaaa....” Fred Weasley sang with a voice so ridiculous two-thirds of the Great Hall, teachers included, burst into unrestrained laughter. While no one was looking, the Weasley twins had cast illusions on themselves and now were looking like eighteenth century dukes, the moustaches and the rapiers added to the red lion of Gryffindor. “Will you?”

“Yes,” the Chaser of Gryffindor replied, before slapping him and marching away.

Three seconds later, Alicia Spinnet administered the same treatment to George.

“Well, we best prepare for difficult days,” Alexandra commented with a sigh.

“Err...Alex...”

Luna and Hermione were making urgent signs, and when she turned her head she saw...Draco Malfoy.

“Heiress Potter,” the blonde-haired Slytherin bent the knee like Diggory did. “I implore your indulgence, but I am in need for a partner for the Winter Ball, and you are the most powerful and renowned witch of our year...”

Alexandra had to admit, she hadn’t see it coming. What was in her glass this morning? Draco Malfoy was asking her to go to a ball? Was the world suddenly going to end this evening?

That said, the moment of shock passed, the Potter Heiress knew she was going to need someone. And even if Susan had been invited, which wasn’t the case, Lady Zabini had warned her that for certain formal events, it was best to choose someone of the opposite sex, no matter one’s particular preferences.”

“Hey Draco!” A Gryffindor she honestly couldn’t remember the name shouted. “The last pranks we gave you weren’t enough? You want to be punished by the Basilisk-Slayer now?”

Ultimately, it was the deciding factor. The Gryffindor boys were standing and approaching the Ravenclaw table, and she really, really didn’t want to dance or even be near them for the better part of an evening.

“Heir Malfoy, I accept.” The photo Luna took of the horrified visages of the Lions ten feet away was going to be multiplied one hundred times and placed in the Loud Duck, she was going to make sure of it.

As the son of Lucius Malfoy stood up, she whispered to his left ear.

“I don’t want to hear any bigot or hateful blood-purist expression from your mouth on the Ball’s evening, understood?” The third-year pure-blood teenager nodded vigorously. “I will tell you the colour of my robes after the thirteenth. I expect you to wear something which will not clash with them.”

Alexandra fell back on her seat, and returned to her plate of sea food, which had unfortunately become quite cold.

Morag looked like she was going to say something, just before Blaise Zabini and a Hufflepuff Boy asked at the same time.

“Morag MacDougal, do you want to go to the Ball with me?”

Nigel chuckled, and he was far from the only one...

**13 November 1993, Paris, France**

“No, not this one,” Alexandra did not raise her eyes or manifested her exasperation, but it was because all of it had been exhausted hours ago.

“Try the blue one,” Stella Zabini spoke. Unlike her, her guardian looked completely in her element, chatting with the employees of each clothes shop they entered, studying dozens of dresses before dragging her to the fitting rooms.

And to say that when Blaise had taken a Portkey to return to Hogwarts after one hour, she had been hopeful this session was going to be over quickly.

Force to admit, she had been wrong. Oh, she had been wrong. They had spent one hour in the first couple of shops. And while many, many things had been bought, her dress for the robe was not among them.

This had been four, no five hours ago, though to be fair – not that she particularly wanted to be, you understand – they had eaten a quick sandwich in one of the beautiful parks Magical Paris took for granted.

And though they had visited something like ten shops, Stella had informed her with a large smile they had not seen a quarter of the first-class stores of Paris, world capital of fashion. This didn’t reassure her at all.

“This blue robe won’t do at all. Try to the yellow one.”

“I’m sure you knew it before I put it on, Stella,” Alexandra said in a semi-tragic tone.

“It’s better to be certain, I’m sure you will agree. You are going to the ball with the Malfoy Heir, you need to be beautiful and leave a nice impression to the audience.”

“Just a ‘nice’ impression?” She wondered out loud.

Stella Zabini gave her a thin smile.

“This Winter Ball is an important event, but it is a minor one for students like you compared to the real balls, parades, and festivities which will be no doubt announced before the opening of the Tournament. The choice of the Hofburg to host such an event is telling. There are going to be thousands of diplomats, Ministry-appointed officials, and famous witches and wizards, it’s the only reason why they would choose these immense ballroom halls.”

Alexandra could notice the hidden message behind the words loud and clear.

“You are saying there won’t be much dancing.”

“Nearly none,” the dark-skinned Lady confirmed with a nod. “Since this Ball is officially given in the honour of the students, I think they will choose a few students to open it with a waltz...which means I will have to make sure your dancing is perfect over the next weekends.”

Alexandra grimaced, but didn’t protest. If there were going to be thousands of the most important witches and wizards of the world here, she didn’t want to be ridiculous.

“No, no the yellow robe. Maybe this black-blue set? I was surprised you chose Draco Malfoy as your partner for this event.”

“I still don’t like him at all,” Alexandra admitted, “but of the twenty boys who were chosen by the Scuola Regina to attend, he was one of the ‘safe’ choices. I mean, he went with his parents to many Ministry balls these last years, and unlike at school he didn’t create any scandal. And since Susan wasn’t invited – not that it would have been prudent to choose her as my partner...”

“Venice, Italy, and Austria are relatively tolerant countries, Alexandra, as far as same-sex relationships are concerned. Of course, there will so many wizards and witches of different countries it is best to not offend someone.”

The Black Widow placed five new robes in front of her.

“But I agree, your choice of Draco Malfoy is one of the safest among the twenty likeliest candidates. Going with a Gryffindor would have been...ill-advised. Everyone knows students are young and limited in their choices, but it is best not to show close ties with Albus Dumbledore at the moment.”

“Even if he killed Grindelwald once for all?” She asked as more robes arrived before being discarded in the next seconds.

“Especially because he killed Grindelwald,” Stella countered. “His moment of glory is at hand...and from what you told me, it will likely be the apex of his influence before the cliff. It’s best to present a facade of neutrality.”

“The Malfoys aren’t neutral, unless I missed something from your Wizengamot lessons,” the third-year Ravenclaw said with a frown.

“They are Dark in the Wizengamot. On the international stage, Lucius Malfoy preaches non-interventionism and free trade. Yes, I know, it’s a lot of political nonsense, but this is his official position. Since last summer, he is mostly a neutral force in the debates of the International Confederation of Wizards. And his son is young enough to be essentially seen as a blank state in politics.”

“The other Slytherin boys, apart from Blaise, are all but Death Eaters in training.” Montague and Warrington had been in the Heir’s conspiracy, and while they had stopped venting their stupidity in public, the looks they gave her every time they met in the corridors were not friendly. “Cedric Diggory and Roger Davies would have been fine, but Cho and Cedric are going together, and frankly the two are older students.”

The other boys, she had plenty of reasons to dislike. With the Battle of Samhain, many rumours had spread again of her ‘affinity with the Dark’, and some of these elderly teenagers, who should have known better, were the most fervent supporters of these theories. A lot of this belief was rooted in jealousy. It was never good for your ego when a third-year girl was able to do things you were likely never going to achieve in your lifetime.

Better to blame the ‘Dark Lady’ than to question your academic schedule which made sure you were going to be an average Ministry worker for the next five decades.

“These kinds of Balls are pure political affairs, and I skip them when I have an excuse. There’s not much to say. No overt expressions of friendships with your dance partner, unless you really, really want to be in the headlines of every newspaper the morning after and give Dumbledore a heart attack.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Alexandra said with an evil smile.

“If a group of politicians demand your opinion on a school subject, try to be non-committal, or failing this, present reasonable arguments and be extremely polite. I will give you a list of photos and names with the correct introductions and titles, but I’m afraid there’s so many people invited I won’t be able to give you everyone important.”

“To sum-up, whatever wizards and witches said to me, stay polite and don’t offer any insult.”

Her guardian nodded while giving back certain robes to the employee of the clothes shop and preparing others for the purchases. This meant they were ready to move to begin a new shopping phase...again.

“Yes, it’s exactly that. Your slaying of two Basilisks made you a minor celebrity last summer, but that’s all you are for the moment: a minor celebrity. Some may remember your name. Most will surely not, and will be more interested by the fact you’re a Hogwarts student. Since you don’t know these politicians, renowned Potion Masters or Curse-Breakers, and everyone knows this is a massive political gathering, it is in your best interest that people will only remember your name when they see it in the Tournament next year.”

“I’m not sure to be one of the Hogwarts Champions,” the black-haired witch reminded her.

“If there was a single Champion per school and Sforza’s superior did not want you in the Tournament, I would be far less confident,” the Venetian witch told her as they entered a new shop. This one looked to be filled with even more expensive clothes than the last five ones, which was saying something. The French name, translated in English, was ‘the Gala Marvels’ or something equivalent. “But this is the reality. I do not advise you to throw away the selection trials which will happen next year, but do your best and you will surely be a Champion. It’s not like the senior students Hogwarts has are worth very much by comparison.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence.”

And then a young brown-haired man came out of the maze of robes and other expensive clothes holding *the* robe.

It was a magnificent emerald dress, one which most likely should be in a Princess’ wardrobe. There were plenty of emeralds everywhere, and while the fashion was rather conservative, the material was flowing around her hands like it was silk.

Seeing the look of satisfaction on Stella’s visage, there was no doubt she had arranged it in the first place and that all other shops had been to satisfy her shopping addiction.

“It should nicely compliment your eyes. And there are emerald earrings and several accessories to make the ensemble absolutely perfect.”

Alexandra thought to open her mouth to protest this was far too much, that this robe was going to cost a fortune of Galleons...but watching the satisfied smile of her guardian, she didn’t voice it. No doubt Stella knew exactly the price of the robe, and she didn’t care. What was she supposed to do?

“This is too much but thank you.”

When they left *Merveilles de Gala* fifty minutes later, five more robes, all of a different style but probably as expensive as the first, were now hers.

**4 December 1993, Hofburg Palace, Vienna, Austria**

The moment his female partner for the ball opened her mouth, Neville knew it was going to be a long, long evening.

“You look like an overweight centaur in these robes. Could you have tried to wear something which was fashionable in the 1930s?”

And to say he had hesitated ten seconds before running into the melee to get a partner for the Winter Ball. This hesitation had cost him dearly.

“It’s the tradition of the Longbottoms to wear robes like these for their first great introduction to modern society, Blackford. It has been this way for more than three hundred years. Merlin and Morgana, why did girls like Abbot or Granger were...no, in hindsight, not Granger. Whatever insults Annabeth Blackford had for him, it was nothing compared to the wrath and the loathing Hermione Granger had for him. Him, Leo and Ron, but since the latter two were not at Hogwarts this month, he would have been massacred by the Gryffindor-turned-Ravenclaw if he had dared asking her for the Ball. Carmichael was going with Granger. Good luck to him.

“You mean that for more than three hundred years, your ancestor ridiculed themselves in these robes? I wonder how they found women to marry. Did they wear pink robes at their second dance?”

The Boy-Who-Lived had to tighten his fists as the golden coach stopped and he descended the stairs before helping like a gentleman the older Slytherin girl to walk down the stairs. He took great care to ensure her pointed heels were as far away from his feet as it was magically possible.

One by one, the coaches arrived, and the rest of the Hogwarts students arrived. He could admit outright he was jealous. While a few were staying silent and seemed to exchange vague and polite comments about the weather, a large majority looked genuinely happy to be with their current partners. George and Fred were joking with Angelina and Alicia. Roger Davies was explaining the history of Magical Vienna to Penelope Clearwater. And unlike him, they had obviously been able to choose their dress robes. It had not been dictated to them by a forceful grandmother.

Somehow, Neville had a feeling it was the same pressure – not from his grandmother, but from the public and the Ministry – which was going to see him entered in this new Tournament. He hoped he was wrong, because it didn’t look like the kind of thing his luck was going to save him miraculously in front of ten thousand spectators. In fact, after the events of the last two and a half years, he didn’t want to participate in this dangerous adventure.

He was looking in direction of the massive palace that was the Hofburg when they arrived, and as such missed them until they walked towards MacDougal and Zabini.

Alexandra Potter and Draco Malfoy.

For a full ten seconds, he didn’t recognise the girl. The long hairs of the Exiled Queen had been combed like...like a Queen, and her robe was also fit for a sovereign. Her robe was green emerald, as were her long gloves, her heels, her earrings, and her necklace. There were gold weavings to accentuate the edges, and if his eyes didn’t betray him, there were dozens of emeralds crimped everywhere. To her side Malfoy had come with a green-black robe which formed a natural duo with hers.

Neville stared with his mouth open...she was pretty, she was queenly, she was...

“Stop staring at Potter, ‘partner’,” Blackford didn’t pull his fist in his head, the teachers coming would have seen it, but the point of her left heel missed his right shoe by inches.

“I was not staring,” the future Lord Longbottom protested.

“You were staring,” repeated the Slytherin girl, rolling her shoulders under her modest black dress. “Don’t worry, neither Malfoy nor you have a chance to be invited for a kiss at midnight in the gardens.”

“You would like this, no?” He answered the moment Snape turned his head away and Professor Flitwick marched to join Professor McGonagall. “Your House is ruined, I heard. You could use a few gold coins to erase your cousins’ debts. No wonder you can’t afford an expensive rose for this Winter Ball.”

“At least I have an excuse for arriving in a robe unfit for a future Lord,” Blackford smiled evilly. “This robe is the best I can afford with the money I win working every summer. What’s your excuse, my Lord, for your monumental error of fashion?”

It was tempting to murder the Slytherin immediately, but there were two immediate problems. First, Snape was now looking directly at him, and would not let one of his precious vipers die without cursing him. Secondly, if he killed her, he would have no one to enter the palace with.

Professor Dumbledore pronounced a short speech to them, commanding them to uphold the best values of each Hogwarts House: nobility, wisdom, unity, and cunning. Personally, he didn’t think it was very much a quality the Snakes and Snape had in them, but he supposed their Headmaster had to find something for the House of Salazar.

They were forced to form a column and hold their hands like small children, and unavoidably Blackford squeezed her long black nails into his hand the moment Professor Sprout – nearly unrecognisable in her best yellow robes – had her back turned.

They advanced slowly towards the great doors, both for the heels all the girls were using, and to allow the growing crowd to part its way. Melancholic opera music was arriving to their ears, and they knew hundreds of eyes were looking at them from every direction. Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang were first behind Professor Dumbledore, and a herald began to shout their names when they were inside.

“Stop smiling like you’re a big fish and their saviour. The Europeans don’t venerate you like the Light do in Britain.”

“Do you have to be such a bitch?” The Boy-Who-Lived demanded in a murmur.

“I do.”

And with his hand about to bleed with her nails and the Austrian spokesman butchering the Longbottom name and his titles, Neville was utterly certain of one thing.

It was going to be a long, long evening.

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As her guardian had warned her, this Winter Ball was boring. Truth to tell, despite the event being ‘officially’ in the honour of the future European Magical Tournament, it was more an excuse for the politicians of several continents to meet each other and boast about their recent achievements.

There was no mingling with the other foreign students, or with the adults for that matter. The Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws and Slytherins boys and girls had been parked from the start on a separate section of the second floor after the opening dance. Granted, there was a large buffet and excellent music, but there was nothing else to do but watch the spectacle.

The two things she had dreaded the most about the Winter Ball, the first dance and the visit of the Queen of the Exchequer, had been over in the first fifteen minutes. Thanks to the dance lessons, the waltz had ended before she had truly time to worry – the affair had been awfully formal anyway – and a black-masked woman she had nonetheless recognised had nodded at her. Alexandra had returned the nod. Five seconds later, there was no sign of the Dark Lady anywhere in the crowd.

Now they were waiting for the gathering to end or for the adults in the vast ballroom below to remember they existed. Given the loud chatter, the music, and the lively conversations, it was going to take a while. Fortunately, the food was good, and there was plenty to admire in their surroundings.

“I don’t think I have ever seen so many African wizards in one location, save at a Quidditch match,” Daphne spoke. Like Lady Zabini, Lord Greengrass had not spared the expense where his Heiress’ dress robe was concerned. Daphne looked positively radiant in her sumptuous sapphire-coloured robe, which had a lot of sapphires and silver added to the material.

The irony had not escaped most Hogwarts girls which had looked at them. Alexandra, Ravenclaw, was in Slytherin green, and Daphne, Slytherin, was in a dark blue very close to the Ravenclaw dominant colour.

“It’s not just Africa,” Morag commented after sipping one of the non-alcoholic beverages their buffet had been filled with. In her red robe, her friend was definitely making sure her Irish roots were not forgotten. And if it meant usurping the Gryffindor colours, well it was too bad for the House of Godric. “I think there are diplomats of every country tonight. I’m sure this group behind in front of the orchestra are Japanese tempest-wizards, and around them there are Brazilian and Egyptian witches.”

“I don’t think there is a single Ministry unrepresented tonight.” Hermione may have a far more restricted budget, but her pale blue dress had managed to gain an impressive blush from Eddie Carmichael. “Unless I’m missing something?”

“I don’t think there’s everyone missing for Europe. Sweden, Norway, Finland are there for the Scandinavian countries, not that it’s surprising given that their children go to Durmstrang. Portugal, Navarra, Aragon and Spain are there too. France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Wurttemberg, and Belgium have all been called...”

“I think everyone is present,” Daphne acknowledged. “Hum...maybe not the unrecognised Balkan countries...but who would want to invite them, honestly?”

Obviously, for those who thought things were better in the magical world than in the non-magical one where the Balkans were concerned, the reality was disappointing again. Where Yugoslavia should be on a map, there were dozens of Wizarding enclaves fighting and killing each other.

“No one,” Tracey acknowledged, the cleavage of her black dress revealing far more cleavage than Morag, Daphne and Alexandra’s together. “I’m more surprised someone invited the Ottomans and the Greeks at the same gathering. The Sultan of the Sublime Porte and the Hegemon of Olympia, really, really don’t like each other.”

“They must have signed a binding agreement to not use violence tonight,” Morag said in a thoughtful voice.

Alexandra didn’t comment, she had been a bit briefed on them two weeks ago. But it was still putting her somewhat ill-at-ease.

By ICW law, every member-state of the organisation had to have a ‘Ministry of Magic’ enforcing the Statute of Secrecy. It was not something negotiable. In fact, even Wizarding communities refusing to join the ICW – like the Balkans instable hamlets – needed to respect the Statute, least Aurors of a member state invaded to force them to respect the rules. It was the law which was the cornerstone of the ICW, the reason of its existence since 1692.

But once it was established, all Ministries were not equal, and in a lot of countries, the Minister was merely an administrator answering to higher powers than he or she. Russia still had a Tsar, of which Lyudmila Romanov was the second eldest child – which in parentheses did not look good for the survival of the eldest, a sickly young man called Nicholas – and the monarch-wizard was the absolute sovereign of his country. The Ottomans had a Sultan, though by tradition it was the Grand Vizier and his subordinates who did most of the rule. Venice was a Republic of thirty Great Families, and the Minister was randomly chosen from one of them as an onerous duty to be discharged. India had dozens of Princes and Maharajas. Persia had a Shah, and certain Southern American cultures were still in the habit of executing any Spanish-speaking wizard which entered their redoubts without permission.

And the numbers of the ICW members where the Minister was the chief of the executive would have been lower if Grindelwald had not decided to massacre the European nobility in the 1940s.

“I’m a bit relieved we aren’t below with all those politicians,” Hannah admitted, adjusting nervously around her hips her pink robe. “I was afraid not speaking any language beyond English would cause an international incident.”

“I strongly advise you to learn French, Hannah,” Daphne replied in her Ice Queen persona. “It is the diplomatic language by excellence, and with the Quidditch World Cup coming, the occasions to use it aren’t going to be scarce.”

“I don’t know...”

“Alexandra has nearly mastered it, and she began during the summer holidays.”

It was true, though ‘mastering it’ was maybe an exaggeration. Lyre had given her plenty of lessons, but she estimated it would take a couple of months to be completely fluent. Like it or not, French was a complicated language, be it in rules, grammar, exceptions, and conjugation. On the other hand, Susan loved when she whispered soft words in French in her ears.

“Alexandra succeeds in everything she wants,” Hannah smirked. “Half of the assembly was devouring her with their eyes at the opening of the dance.”

Wait. What?

Obviously her surprise had been noticed, because the smile of the Abbot Heiress grew further.

“Oh. You didn’t watch?”

“I was concentrated on not falling, missing a waltz move and making myself ridiculous,” she defended herself.

“Good point,” Daphne shrugged. “But Hannah is right, plenty of young men...and women I suppose, were not exactly shy watching you. Particularly Malfoy and Longbottom. Pansy Parkinson and Lavender Brown are going to be soooooo jealous...”

The insinuation gave her the urge to wince.

“As flattering as the idea to be admired is, I didn’t choose Malfoy to annoy Parkinson. He was preferable to Montague and Warrington, Diggory and the Weasley Twins were already taken, and unfortunately it’s not like we had a lot of choices.” Twenty boys and twenty girls invited, and several of the Hogwarts students were already couples. She hoped that if there was a Great Ball next year, there was going to be more choice where the dancing partners were concerned.

“True. Still, if I were you I would not turn my back on Pansy when we come back to Hogwarts. Being uninvited to the Ball was already a harsh Potion to swallow, but the fact Draco ran to be your cavalier...her screams in our dorms were not pleasant to listen to.”

Right, because she had not enough problems already waiting in the background. The hydra softly hissed, fortunately half-asleep from the fish appetisers she had devoured minutes ago.

“Hopefully for Pansy, Draco will invite her to the next Tournament dancing festivities,” As Lucius Malfoy did not look he was going to resign as the ICW representative soon, his son and Heir had a very good chance to be invited with him next time.

“Yes, hopefully for her,” Daphne’s hints were sometimes difficult to catch on, but this time Alexandra understood perfectly her meaning. And turning her head, it was not hard to see Draco Malfoy and Neville Longbottom, along with a few other boys, were staring at her...hard. Oh, they tried to look away when she was watching them, but it was too late. “You will have to tell me the name of the shops you visited at Paris. I’ve never seen this type of emerald gown before...”

The discussion continued for a few minutes, the talking regularly turning to some outrageous attires witches and wizards below had chosen to wear this evening. A Japanese wizard had decided to visit Vienna and grace them with his presence in samurai armour. An Indian Prince had decided to overwhelm everyone by exploding the record of diamonds it was possible to wear on a human body. There was an Amerindian witch which was inside a costume of large feathers from head to toe.

And then music stopped, and a magical platform was erected in front of the orchestra in less than a minute.

“I think the waiting period is over,” Tracey quipped, and all the girls returned to their partners for the evening. Seconds after she was once again taking Draco Malfoy’s arm, Dumbledore and the Heads of House were back. They formed an impressive array of expressions. Professor Sprout was as jovial as ever. Professor Flitwick in his clothes reminding he was a retired Duellist Champion, was distinguished and the consummate professional. Professor Snape was threatening and cold. There was no other way he could be described. And Professor McGonagall looked very much like an old woman who had long ago passed her prime, dignified but lacking steel.

And of course there was Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock and Headmaster of Hogwarts, who once again had chosen robes of so horrible taste Alexandra wondered if he was blind when it came to fashion. Tonight it was a combination of pink and blue, and it was simply to vomit. Even while she was restricted to simple shirts, jeans and sneakers, Alexandra didn’t think she had ever tried to traumatise the eyes of the habitants of Privet Drive. Seriously, could he not wear black or something simple? It was not that complicated, and Dumbledore had earned one million Galleons for the slaying of Gellert Grindelwald. He could afford hiring a fashion advisor...

Right before her, Neville Longbottom and Annabeth Blackford threw each other spiteful looks, bringing back a smile on her lips. Every Common Room at Hogwarts had had quite a laugh when they discovered the pairing luck and the limited number of candidates had forced upon them. Blackford had a bit mellowed where purity of blood was concerned, but she hated the Gryffindors with a passion – it did not help that for the better part of September she had been one of the favourite targets of Leo Black and his accomplices.

Her black heels missed the feet of Neville Longbottom again, but the Potter Heiress was ready to bet that before the end of this Winter Ball, Longbottom was going to experience suffering.

“There is going to be a Tournament announcement. Do not attract shame and dishonour upon your school.”

They descended the series of stairs, and Alexandra was really, really glad her heels were more enchanted than her robe. There were so many enchantments on these shoes it was like she was walking on a soft floor of cotton. She was going to have to thanks Lady Zabini once more, didn’t she? The robe and everything she wore at the moment were so pleasant to wear...magic was truly a wonderful thing in moments like this.

Couple by couple, they advanced in the ballroom, and the crowd on each side dispersed to let them pass. To their immediate left were the students of Durmstrang, and to the right were the students of Beauxbatons. Alexandra would have enjoyed sizing up the competition, but sadly given the dozens of wizard forming human barricades, it was not possible. Lyudmila Romanov was there for the Durmstrang Institute though, wearing a purple-black gown, and Fleur Delacour and her platinum hairs were so uncommon there was no risk to miss her. But apart from these two...well, maybe there was Astrid, but Alexandra was too far to be sure it was her and not a girl with the same hair’s shade.

Obviously, the ICW was like any international organisation, and a thin wizard in black robes soon began a twenty minutes-long speech on the platform, perorating about international cooperation, fairness, the noble spirit of competition and the ties uniting every member state of the ICW.

A lot of people yawned during these twenty minutes.

And then she climbed the steps and suddenly the ICW Head of Sports or something like that was completely forgotten.

The woman who was now on the platform was *powerful*. Diplomatically, everyone invited in the Hofburg Palace was using the minimum of magic save in a cosmetic or illusionary effect. And this woman respected the rules...partially. But the ripples of magic and dark power were there.

Having felt Dumbledore’s magic more than once, Alexandra thought the Defeater of Grindelwald had a good advantage on the witch. Expect, of course, Dumbledore was old. This witch was not, and by the looks of things could be counted to live long, long past the time the Chief Warlock would be buried in the British Isles.

Alexandra knew this woman was Angelica Sforza...and she had the confirmation the Knight Priest was far from the only monster the Exchequer had waiting in the shadows. The Succubus was beautiful, but in a style very different from Stella Zabini. Where her guardian tried to show the maximum amount of skin, the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina had a long yellow-green robe...which would have been conservative if it did not tightened around her body revealing each and every one of her curves.

“Students, Professors, Delegates...” the hydra hissed in displeasure, and the third-year Ravenclaw realised with a wince the French-speaking voice was laced with a sort of mind-altering power. The effect was weak, but it was enough for her inner animal to take offense and neutralise it. She had to pinch Draco Malfoy with her nails to prevent him from falling to this small compulsion.

“Welcome to Vienna!”

The usual greetings were said, the thanks were given, and then the whispers ceased as the important things were announced.

“The European Magical Tournament will begin officially on October the thirty-first, 1994,” the Succubus revealed in French, and Alexandra saw that her appearance had already changed. At first it had been a blonde-haired witch who was speaking, but her hairs were now black like onyx. The announcement didn’t please her either. Samhain. Why did everything have to begin on the day of Samhain?

“And it will end on May the thirty-first, 1995, four days after the last great challenge of the Tournament, with the Summer Ball.”

At these words, there were some applause, but the clapping rapidly stopped as a gigantic mirror was conjured on the back wall and a list of information began to appear.

“As I suppose everybody is aware by now, the European Magical Tournament will see four schools participating. The Durmstrang Institute, the Magical Academy of Beauxbatons, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and the Scuola Regina, which has been chosen to host this unforgettable event.”

Remarkably, the assertion was delivered with no gloating or provocation.

“To avoid the errors of the previous Tri-Wizard Tournaments, it has been decided unanimously the Headmasters and Headmistresses of each school will *not* be the judges of the tasks. This honour will go to ten neutral ICW-appointed wizards and witches renowned in their area of specialty.”

All right, this was really different. According to Hermione, the Headmistresses and Headmasters of each school were always part of the jury. Always. Many times there were other judges added to their complement, but never in several centuries had they been put on the sidelines like this.

Alexandra was not going to complain. Would Dumbledore have judged her fairly? Maybe, maybe not. But the scales would not have been in her favour. At least that way, the judges had no reason to hate her.

“The number of tasks for the entirety of the Tournament has been fixed at seven. Each task will be worth one hundred points, with one hundred being the grade for a perfect score, and zero points for a refusal to participate.”

Murmurs and exclamations echoed in the golden hall of the Hofburg.

“Yes,” continued the Headmistress like she had expected these exclamations – which was probably the case – as her hairs became longer and red, “we are not going to force underage wizards and witches to participate with a Blood Oath or a magical contract enforced by the Triwizard Cup. We are no longer living in medieval times.”

There was a round of laughter at these last words.

“Thank you. As I was saying, the participation in this Tournament is strictly voluntary. Yes, there is gold, prestige, prizes, honour and glory at stake. Yes, I know it is important for each school to win the Tournament. But to be clear, we are not forcing anyone to participate.”

Alexandra rolled her eyes. Angelica Sforza was perhaps not forcing anyone, but the Queen of the Exchequer had already begun with her a few months ago.

“That doesn’t mean we are letting the Champions participate without conditions. Once a wizard or a witch is chosen, he will participate and do his best to win the Tournament. We will not strip anyone of his or her magic, but there will be financial penalties for everyone refusing to participate in a task for no good reason. We are not pitiless and cruel. Every Champion who is severely wounded in a Task and unable to continue will have his medical fees paid, the Tournament Healers constantly to his bedside, and will not participate in the next tasks. Sending a bright student to his or her death does not interest us.”

The voice of the Venetian witch increased in intensity.

“There will be four Champions per school, thus making it a total of sixteen. There will be four replacements which will be granted for each Champion. It might seem a lot, but be advised that not having one replacement for a Champion is grounds for elimination and cancelling of the points won in the previous tasks. Since we do want a measure of impartiality for the choosing, it has been decided to organise preliminaries in each of the participating schools. The exact nature of these pre-trials is left to the school itself, but the Scuola Regina and the International Confederation of Wizards have agreed on a certain number of points. The selection methods must be completely of a non-lethal nature. It must have a point-based system like the main Tournament, and there must be at least three judges, with one ICW official in it. The followings aptitudes of the students must be tested: Knowledge of Magical Creatures, Offensive and Defensive Magic, Charms, Runes, Potions, and Transfiguration.”

It was nice to see how many classes of Hogwarts had been recognised as worthy by this tirade. Goodbye, Astronomy and History of Magic. To be fair to Herbology, it could very well be included with Potions...and DADA was Offensive and Defensive Magic. Or it would have been, if they had competent Professors the first two years.

“There must be at least three pre-trials and less than ten. By May, every Headmaster and Headmistress must have presented a list of five candidates for each Champion slot to the grand jury of the European Magical Tournament. The final choice will be announced on the evening of October the thirty-first, and it will not be negotiable. The twenty students selected for each school, unlike the rest of the Quidditch, Duellist and Academic teams, will stay at the Scuola Regina for the duration of the school year.”

For the moment, it seemed promising. Of course, the preliminaries were going to be decided by Dumbledore, so she had a feeling it was not going to be that simple.

“There will be events of a non-competitive nature during the Tournament. The Yule and Summer Balls are Triwizard traditions the European Magical Tournament will continue, and we will add to them the famous Carnival of Venice.”

Hundreds of excited whispers and cheers welcomed this confirmation. Alexandra groaned. There was going to be long, long days of shopping with her guardian in her future.

“The traditional Weapon, Wand and Heirloom Ceremony will take place on November the third, 1994. The prizes of the Tournament...”

There was a lot of gold at stake, undoubtedly. There were one hundred thousand Galleons for the winner, and one hundred thousand more for the Champions of the winning school – which apparently meant the twenty potential Champions, or at least those who would still be alive when the Tournament officially ended. There were also ‘prizes’ for winner of each task, not counting the sum of Galleons, and there were also Apprenticeship contracts and a lot of contracts in the wings for students impressing in one or several particular fields the judges.

“Now security is our priority,” the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina spoke in a sombre and more reserved tone. “But the vocation of the judges is not to help the Champions. It is not to solve for them the physical, mental or magical issues they have during every day of their life. That does not mean we are willing to throw away lives in tasks the Champions know pertinently they can’t survive beforehand. Before each task, there will be clues for the Champions to prepare correctly, though obviously the students who have successfully completed the previous task will have an advantage over those who didn’t. We will not accept any candidate under thirteen of age. Given the difficulty of the tasks, the possibility is close to zero a student with two years or less of education will succeed without grave injuries. We will not accept students over eighteen either. By this age, you must be in an Apprenticeship or beginning your career, not stay at school.”

That Professor Flitwick narrowed his eyes told her Professor Dumbledore had certainly not the same idea of ‘security’ the Scuola Regina was imposing to the three other schools.

“We will also try to place the Champions in the best conditions we can. Isolated and alone on foreign shores can lead to positive results as much as it can unravel into disaster. Each Champion will have a minimum of three adults and a maximum of seven around him or her to ensure he or she is fully cognisant of the dangers and the preparation the Tournament entails. By obligation, a member of the Champion’s family or the magical guardian will need to assist him or her. An ICW official will also be appointed, for it is out of a question to send in a dangerous situation a Champion who is either suicidal or has refused to prepare for the task ahead. Tutors and members of a teaching staff are accepted. Headmasters or Headmistresses are not.”

Dumbledore was going to be so depressed by these revelations. My, my, my. He could not be the judge. He could not be the advisor...officially. But the Headmasters and Headmistresses, as protocol dictated, had most likely the duty to stay with the Champions from November to May.

“The book of rules and instructions for the European Magical Tournament will be delivered by owl-post to every student making the demand in ten days. Thank you for your attention, and I expect to see you motivated and trained at the Scuola Regina next year!”

Thousands of hands clapped to acclaim the Headmistress, and the racket was properly infernal. It was not loud enough however, to cover completely the voice of Neville Longbottom, asking George before him what the Sforza Succubus had said, because ‘I don’t understand a single word of French’...

The witch left the platform, and as another ICW official began to recite a speech as boring as the one the Departmental Head of the ICW had annoyed them with, it was clear that everything interesting had been said.

By the gesture Professor Flitwick made, they were going to leave the Winter Ball in a few minutes and...

The politician which had been on stage suddenly stopped his uninteresting sentences.

It was not difficult to discover why. The black-robed wizard was trying to cast Finite Incantatem to remove the Silencing Charm which had just been cast on him. Without success, for the time being.

And Lyudmila Romanov strolled onto the stage, her black and purple dress giving her a presence which was as noble as it was terrifying. An aura of darkness began to pour around her, and Alexandra had to admit, it took some guts to challenge the ICW protocol like this.

The Russian girl did not cast a Sonorous or any Charm, but her voice cut through the exclamations and the protests like a knife through butter.

“Champions. My name is Lyudmila Romanov of Durmstrang.”

The smile she gave the assembly was way scarier than her expression seconds ago.

“I am going to win the European Magical Tournament. I doubt any of you in this room can stop me. But to preserve a modicum of suspense, I give you this warning. Train and study like your life is at stake. Train and study each day you have for the next eleven months. And maybe, *maybe* you will last more than a minute against me when we will face each other during the Tournament’s tasks. To the Light and Dark Champions, if you want to please your Powers, you will come and try to make the contest amusing. I don’t want weak contenders, and I don’t care if your House was created a millennium ago. You have eleven months to prepare and decide if your defeat will be humiliating or not. Farewell, Champions and not-Champions.”

There was no applause, no cheers, and no salutations. There was just a shocked audience.

“What a charming Dark Lady,” Fred murmured. Unlike the funny remarks he made in Alexandra’s presence every day, there was no irony whatsoever in his voice.