**Chapter 49**

**Second Chances must be earned**

**16 August 1993, Ministry of Magic, London, England**

“My dear girl...”

*Never*.

“No.” And his audacity was worth a remonstrance too. Their relationship – or rather the lack of relationship if she wanted to be accurate – gave him no rights to call her ‘my dear girl’. Were the students of Hogwarts allowed to call him ‘Whitebeard the absent Headmaster’ to his face?

“And please, Chief Warlock, do not call me ‘my dear girl’. You and I are not friends. My name is Alexandra Potter or if you want to be formal, Heiress Potter. And by the 1847 Guardianship Law I have the right to refuse your interference once.”

It was like the Gryffindors at school trying to call her Alex without her permission. Being impolite apparently was a trait which was shared by many generations of the Light Houses in the Lions’ Tower.

After she had the impression the silence was total. Ninety-nine percent of the crowd looked like they were going to die of shock after she had the gall to correct their supreme leader. Included in it were Lord Liam McLaggen and Lord Sirius Black by the way.

The Headmaster however was really looking at her like one looked at a spoiled child. It just gave Alexandra the urge to add a little bit more but someone beat her to it.

“Hem hem. Chief Warlock Dumbledore, you have neither the authority nor the votes to cancel the decisions of this court,” with her sweet voice and her toad-like appearance, Umbridge was explaining like she was in front of a disobedient child and by the emotion-less visage of Dumbledore, the man did not enjoy being on the receiving end of it. “You need the signature of the Minister, three Department Heads, including the Department of Education, and thirty Wizengamot members for this.”

“And assuming you had all these signatures,” declared Lady Narcissa Malfoy while sending a furious glare at her cousin and the Headmaster, “it would not give you the power to give a magical guardianship to anyone. The decision to cancel a court’s order is exactly that: a decision to cancel it. At no moment does it give you the right to manipulate the laws and replace Madam Umbridge and her assistants.”

The wizards and witches who were now gathered in great numbers in the courtroom protested loudly. It was really dumb. It was also dangerous. This time Alexandra felt a bit of anxiousness because if Dumbledore was really serious and ignored the protocols and the traditions, there was not much difference left between the Death Eaters and the Order of the Phoenix. But how many cases had been swept under the rugs in all these decades because no one had the power or the influence to rise against him?

Men and women shouted in support of the Headmaster or Draco’s mother. The partisans of the former were of course more numerous, but there were little groups arriving minute after minute.

“My experience with children of all age and my tenure as the magical guardian of the young woman gives me an advantage no one has...”

For a second Alexandra was astonished the ‘Defeater of Grindelwald’ had the arrogance to affirm this in public. But then, maybe the years had made him overconfident and she wasn’t going to let the occasion pass to remind him he had abandoned her at Privet Drive.

“Don’t make me laugh.” The green-eyed witch interrupted him. “If there is someone in our world less qualified to speak of what is a magical guardian than you, Chief Warlock, I don’t know who that person is.” She winced as a torrent of insults and screams echoed in the courtroom. “Twelve years,” Alexandra was forced to considerably raise her voice. “You left me alone ten years in the Muggle world, using the votes and the influence of my family for your political ambition. Then when I came at Hogwarts I never received any indication you were willing to talk to me.”

“There were considerations...”

“The big question in mind is how long it would have lasted if there hadn’t been a Basilisk to kill and reveal your monumental incompetence?”

The moment she said the words, she understood she had gone too far. The power of the old wizard flared. His body seemed to explode in tremendous energy, the world collapsed in a whirlwind of magic and everything hurt...before it stopped abruptly.

Alexandra realised she had fallen on her knees. Her breath was loud and erratic. The Ravenclaw witch was exhausted. She stood up with difficulty...to realise Andromeda Tonks, Stella Zabini, Narcissa Malfoy, and a few more witches and wizards had their wands directly pointed at Albus Dumbledore.

By the One Ring, he truly had tried to attack her in front of hundreds of witnesses. She did not feel that bad criticising him at all now.

“A Lord-level Aura Pressure directed at an underage witch?” Andromeda Tonks was beyond furious. “For a man of your age and skills, your lapse in control is simply unforgivable.”

Without warning, the ‘Light Lord’ persona was thrown away and the ‘wise and caring Headmaster’ was back.

“An error of appreciation, I assure you.”

The next words of the former Black witch showed how much she believed his excuse.

“You are the Chief Warlock, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and you are the Grand Sorcerer, no? If you can’t handle the truth from the mouth of someone you hurt by your inaction, I think the Wizengamot and the DMLE really should investigate why you still have these titles.”

A flow of accusations was directed at the lawyer-witch by many wizards, including Sirius Black. The insults directed at her failed to make her raise an eyebrow.

“HEM HEM,” Dolores Umbridge came back into the exchange, hammering her judge’s gavel several times. “The Aura Pressure is a minor magical attack and it was done on someone underage. It is a felony punished by a fine of ten thousand Galleons. Given the numerous outrages to court and irregularities you caused today, Chief Warlock, I think we can raise the fine to twenty thousand Galleons.” The ugly woman looked at the hundreds of people in front of her in a very amphibian manner. “As neither Headmaster Dumbledore nor Lord Black has presented any evidence to support their ridiculous assertions, the judgement of this court stands and Lady Zabini remains Alexandra Potter’s guardian. The audience is adjourned.”

Her judge’s gavel struck the wood one last time.

“WAIT!”

The shout interrupted the cacophony of whispers, insults and mini-explosions coming out of the wands. To her surprise, it was from Sirius Black that the demand had come. In a hurry, the man who should have been her godfather closed the distance to be in front of her.

“Alexandra,” it was really unpleasant to have someone you didn’t know call you so familiarly, “I know I haven’t been the godfather you wished, but please you do not let your anger push you on the wrong choice. The guardian who was chosen for your is a suspected murderess and she will not give you the future you deserve. The Dark Houses may speak well, but they are evil and practise outlawed magic, tainting the souls and the mind. Please give me a second chance.”

The last sentence really told her everything there was to know about Sirius Black. Maybe this was going to give her another enemy...but with allies like him, you really didn’t need rivals or opponents.

“I,” and even to her, her voice was devoid of anything pleasant, “do not give second chances like Chocolate Frogs. You want redemption? You have to earn it, Lord Black. Twelve years of ignoring your oaths aren’t going to be forgiven by a nice speech.”

There was something really ugly which was shown on the man’s pleasant visage and Alexandra realised Sirius Black had the same potential for madness Lady Cassiopeia Black had.

Alexandra climbed the steps of the courtroom without looking back as the chaos became impossible to contain and the screams and even a few spells were thrown around. The tumult was total and more than once she was nearly trampled by the hundreds of spectators.

“I really hope we are not doing this every Monday,” she told Morag as the two were back next to the Ministry lift.

**18 August 1993, Zabini Manor, England**

Her prediction she had slept her last night at her friend’s home this summer had evidently been wrong, in the end. The problems created by Dumbledore and Sirius Black’s late arrival had been sufficient for Morag and she to go back to MacDougal Manor and wait patiently for the adults to stop bickering and behave in a mature manner.

When Morag’s father came back at nine o’clock in the evening, they learned all the fires had not yet been extinguished. Dumbledore had convened a new emergency session of the Wizengamot. The Grey and the Dark had all decided to attend and it had quickly degenerated into a concert of old grudges, non-polite commentaries and political infighting. It was not until the next afternoon they learned Fudge had publically supported the decision taken by Dolores Umbridge.

All this agitation when their Headmaster would have been best inspired to never enter the courtroom. In hindsight, the inefficiency of the Ministry was not due to the inaction of his politicians but in their meddling of affairs they had no stake in.

Let’s see the good side. It had given her a nice subject of conversation before leaving Ireland.

“Dumbledore and Umbridge will not spend their holidays together,” she had remarked at dinner.

It was this evening she had learned Dumbledore was very much a supporter of the Anti-Creatures law, but there were four exceptions: he was pro-werewolf, pro-giant, pro-merpeople, and pro-centaur. On the other side of the administration, Dolores Umbridge had lost her mother and her boyfriend in an attack by werewolves during the war. The carnage had been so bad the dead had only been identified by necklaces and rings. Someone defending the beasts could not be anything but an enemy from the toad-woman’s perspective.

Were-questions aside, the morning after she packed most of her possessions and was forced to temporarily say goodbye to Morag. She left Tisiphone behind and a lot of parchment they had used for their contingencies and plans.

One Portkey later, she was in front of great metallic gates painted in green and red. The emblem of House Zabini, a roaring Chimera, was figuring prominently. Two guards clothed in red and green were there to welcome them seconds after her arrival and it was there Alexandra left Lord MacDougal after having thanked him for his hospitality.

As the gates closed behind her, the trunk containing most of her possessions had suddenly no less than four House Elves fighting for the ‘honour’ of transporting it. One in particular looked very different from the three others. The red and green attire – which looked to be the official uniform for House Zabini – had a lot holes and she had the feeling the T-shirt had been inversed with what was supposed to be below the belt. The shoes were also not supposed to serve as hats, Houses Elf culture or not.

The fact one Elf was stopping him from beating his head against the white walls setting the limits of the Zabini property was another deranging sign.

“Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!” shouted the weird Elf before he and his guardian disappeared. The two other House Elves promptly greeted her, told her they were going to deliver her possessions to her bedroom and disappeared again.

Atalanta on her shoulder – her owl had decided to explore her new domain from the deluxe perch - Alexandra was escorted by one of the guards on a path under the trees. It took her only a couple of minutes to realise they were not going to the stupendous manor whose shadow was somewhat visible across the gardens and the trees. Instead, they seemed to get around Zabini manor itself and this brought her to a new realisation: Lady Zabini and Blaise had a lot of lands to their name.

Her summer in Ireland had allowed her to see that Morag would be a very wealthy Heiress when she inherited the Ladyship. MacDougal Manor was not exactly small, and the green hills and plains around it belonged to her parents too. The nearby village where diverse magical species, wizards, and cousins lived were in part owned by one MacDougal or another.

The space Zabini Manor had been built on crushed them without trying. There were hundreds of flowers and tree species. There were artificial small rivers and ponds. There were fountains of all styles, sizes, and ancient times. There were labyrinths like in children’s parks. There were non-magical animals like ducks and squirrels living next to small fairies and inoffensive magical species. Here and there gardeners in Zabini uniform were working with House Elves to create and maintain what was in truth an entirely different environment than the common South English landscape waiting outside.

It was something to know House Zabini was wealthy, but here Alexandra had the full confirmation. The pay and the food for the employees had to cost a non-negligible sum. The efforts to import non-British flowers and trees plus the species to create a preserve here were certainly multiplying by ten at least the gold spent.

Atalanta left her shoulder when she saw several brown owls sleeping in the trees. The Potter heiress let her go; in the trees of this green-brown-gold park, a white owl was going to be impossible to miss.

It was after a small wooden bridge that her guide left her alone, pointing her towards a gathering of red-green clothes in the distance.

“Lady Zabini is waiting for you, Miss Potter,” she thanked the man and then marched without hurrying towards the clearing where a dozen men appeared to be polishing and scrubbing a large green rock.

It took her only a few steps for this supposition to be made erroneous. The clearing was incredibly large, and the green rock looked like it was in the middle of an enclosure like the lions or the bears at a zoo. Then she realised the fact that the green rock had scales. Twenty more steps and the wings and the tail were revealed.

The green rock was not a green rock at all. Not unless it had suffered magical mutations to have claws, a head, barbed pikes, and a reptilian body slightly smaller than the Basilisks she had killed.

“What is a dragon doing here?” She asked to herself bewildered.

Alexandra knew dragons existed and were not an illusion. She had seen an angry baby in her first year at Hogwarts and she had not forgotten this unforgettable ‘meeting’. But this one was definitely not a days-old or months-old reptile. It was a grown adult and looked formidable even asleep.

“He is very lazy and we didn’t manage to get him to the reserve today,” answered a voice behind her. Alexandra turned and sure enough, Lady Stella Zabini was almost next to her. Having seen her two days ago in the courtroom, Alexandra saw her clothes had changed on nearly every aspect. Today the mother of Blaise was wearing the sort of clothes a veterinary surgeon used for their work in the zoo: a long green gown going from neck to foot and with various stains and fluids on it.

She removed her gloves and held her hand that Alexandra shook in greeting. There was strength behind it, and Alexandra revised upwards the strength of her new guardian. Stella Zabini may not look like a bodybuilder, but she had strength in her arms.

“I am sorry for not welcoming you at the entrance, Heiress Potter.” Well at least her little speech to Dumbledore had not been lost in the high-pitched racket.

“You can call me Alexandra, Lady Zabini.”

A chuckle came out of her lips and with the song of birds in the background it was pleasant to hear.

“Oh Lady Zabini makes me feel horribly old. Please call me Stella.”

“Err...yes, La...Stella.”

“Good,” her smile was so powerful Alexandra wondered if this was a magical spell or someone she had worked at lengthily in front of a mirror. “Do you want to admire the dragon closer?”

“Are they not very dangerous?” She replied unsure. “The dragons are classified XXXXX for a reason...”

Lady Stella Zabini gave her a grin.

“I would never give you the authorisation to be close to a Hungarian Horntail or another aggressive breed like the Ukrainian Ironbelly.” The admission was reassuring. “But Old Frederick is a Welsh Green. The real thing to watch out for is not to be too close, for he is still a middleweight dragon of nine tonnes and sometimes wants a new pillow. Otherwise, he is so lazy we are forced to kill the goats for his meals ourselves before he deigns to open his maw to eat.”

They descended some stairs hidden behind an illusion and Stella Zabini handed her another green protective cloth similar to her own. Touching it, Alexandra could tell that despite the ugly appearance there was protection magic imbued in it.

“How old is the dragon?”

“Oh, he was born four hundred and thirty-two years ago.” Yes, this was very old. Dumbledore was not even born when this dragon was already...doing whatever a dragon does. “For the last couple of centuries, he gave the dragon females of Italy and Venice over one hundred and sixty eggs.”

Once she had finished putting on the green gown, they passed two doors which looked like they were built to resist the charge of ten dragons –which was maybe the case for all she knew – and after climbing one stair and one more door, they were in the enclosure.

It was...humbling. After her fight against the Basilisks she had the time to observe their corpses, but they had been things of horror, snakes created by the Darkest of Magic to kill and kill again until nothing stood in their way. Dragons were by comparison far more beautiful... the green scales were shining under the morning sun like emeralds, helped by all the polishing. They had also a far more noble aspect, with the wings and the draconian body one never dreamed to see outside cartoons and movies in the non-magical world.

“Welsh Green,” murmured Lady Zabini, grabbing her attention as they were only ten feet away from the left paw of the fire-breathing legendary animal, “also named Common Welsh Green. By ICW standards, the species is in the category of middleweight dragons, best known for its love of sheep, goats and cows. Adults, they weigh between eight and nine tonnes. As you can see, the horns and the belly are a slightly yellow-green colour. The males are of a darker shade than the females and far less aggressive.”

“Are their eggs green too?” She demanded while keeping her eyes on the dragon. The dragon-handlers around it were continuing their work and the dragon apart from moving its wings, its four legs or its tail by mere inches was not displaying a great deal of vitality.

“No, they are a deep brown with some green freckles.”

It was extraordinary...but Stella Zabini was right: this Welsh Green was not on the danger level of a Basilisk. In fact, the baby dragon she had met in the corridors was more aggressive and willing to kill them.

Alexandra was curious on one point, though. Smaug had been sleeping in the *Hobbit* on the treasure of the dwarves...

“Are the rumours about dragons sleeping on a colossal treasure true?”

Her new magical guardian pointed at an extra-large nest built for the dragon’s comfort not far from his current sleeping position. The floor was covered in shiny objects with golden colours.

“We regularly enchant items to give him a mattress of gold. All dragons love sleeping on this. We are lucky with the Welsh Green, they accept the objects as presents and in ancient times they rarely attacked wizards to build their ‘fortune’.”

The Ravenclaw witch was handed a large brush and for the next hour or so she participated with the handlers in the grooming of Old Frederick. The dragon rumbled twice in content, but did not open his eyes. Laziness, commented several of the dragon-handlers, when she interrogated them.

Alexandra concluded after several minutes she preferred a lazy dragon over a hungry Basilisk. It was far more satisfying to use the brush than Fragarach.

She learned the two major rules concerning the Welsh Green: first, to never approach a mother dragon protecting her nest, for the maternal instincts of the dragon mothers were second to none. The quasi-totality of the incidents involving Welsh Greens had involved the stealing of their eggs or attacks on nesting mothers. Secondly, it was best not to put a dog near a Welsh Green. It tended to irritate them. After centuries of hunting goats, sheep, and cows, the dragon had developed an extreme aversion for the best friend of the shepherd. When a dog was near a dragon, the smoke was impossible to avoid and the barbecue was imminent.

Since she didn’t take Care of Magical Creatures in September, she decided to ask most questions she had in mind. She had heard a lot of expressions about dragons and wasn’t Dumbledore renowned in part for his discovery of the twelve uses of dragon’s blood? The dragon-handlers were good teachers and answered her questions politely.

“A dragon is one of the most powerful magical creatures in the world and the magic imbued in its heart and bones is largely superior to anything we wizards ever invented,” a young dragon-handler with a blonde beard and a heavy Italian accent explained. “Since we are not monsters and our goal is the preservation of these magnificent reptiles, we do not massacre them for fun and profit. We take their old skins when they shed them twice a year; we pick up the broken claws, horns, and teeth they lose regularly. The dragon dung is of course the fertiliser per excellence and once every three months we put the dragons asleep and take a good litre of blood from the adults.”

“Useful,” she approved as she used her brush for a last caress on the yellow-green belly of Old Frederick. Last year when the final exams were close, it had been rumoured there was dragon claw’s powder available on the illegal market which was not supposed to exist in the fine institution. The negotiated prices had been in Galleons. Powdered dragon horn was used in six Potions of the second-year classes. As for dragon’s blood, it was in such demand that the price for a small phial was in the hundreds of Galleons.

She could see the moral of the tale: don’t go killing Basilisks, create your own dragon preserve, it is far more valuable and less risky.

“How many do you have in your preserve?”

“Counting Frederick here, we will have eighteen Welsh Greens in semi-liberty,” Wow, eighteen large dragons in the same place...it was good at least one was a heavy sleeper, right?

The dragon-handlers went to other activities after a few minutes and Alexandra followed Stella Zabini out of the enclosure, removed the gown and washed her hands vigorously to remove the powerful smell of the dragon.

“I was not aware House Zabini owned a dragon preserve,” Alexandra confessed when they were back to the outskirts of the clearing. On a wooden bench, Blaise’s mother had removed the veterinary boots and was replacing them with black heels so high she didn’t honestly know how someone could walk in them without help.

Of course, as Blaise Zabini was not the one to spread rumours across Hogwarts, it was not exactly like she had an easy source of information in him. On this point the dark-skinned boy was the complete opposite of Draco Malfoy. Because yes, Draco’s father owned a dragon preserve, they all had to bow in front of his arrogance and his greatness, all hail the pureblood cause and blah, blah, bah.

“It is a very recent development in England,” admitted the Lady of House Zabini. “Are you aware of what happened to the dragons of Britain during the rise of Voldemort?”

Alexandra looked at her new guardian with a surprised expression. She used regularly the name of the Dark Lord – or at least his war name because the true one was Tom Marvolo Riddle – but the majority of the wizards and witches of this country were terrified at the idea of uttering the name. According to Morag, it was the result of a vicious Taboo on the name.

“No,” although given the unsmiling expression, she was ready to bet ten galleons she wasn’t going to like it. “But it was the ugliest civil war of the twentieth century in Europe so I guess...killings and destruction?”

“The Red Welsh dragon species, the lesser cousin of the Green Welsh, was completely exterminated in the British Isles,” Stella Zabini replied in a low growl while adjusting her long black robe. “Several specimens survived on the continent, but today there are eight of them alive when in 1960 there were over a hundred. The Green Welsh and the Hebridean Black survived, but their population have not recovered by even half of the bleeding they were hit by. You are a smart witch. I think you can find the reason on your own.”

Alexandra thought rapidly. The dung, the horns, and the claws were valuable, but not extremely so. There were other ingredients to replace them. The liver of a dragon and their meat were likely expensive, but here too there were alternatives. If the Death Eaters or the Order of the Phoenix were after the blood, killing was a monumental waste because they could receive a lot more of the precious liquid over an entire year than in one murder. It left only...

“The heart. They wanted the heartstrings to create more wands,” and at the nod of approval from Stella she felt sick at the carnage done by the British wizards. Yes, she had killed the Basilisks and put a Claim of Conquest upon their corpses. But her objective had been primarily to survive and kill the monsters. You can’t live in peace with a Basilisk unless you’re a Parselmouth...and Riddle had only unleashed the Kings of Snakes at irregular intervals so maybe his control over them wasn’t total.

Killing dragons was a free massacre in service of abominable ideals.

“They did. Unlike unicorns, phoenixes and other magical creatures, the heartstrings of a dragon aren’t cursed at its death. Moreover, dragon parts can create wands for wizards having earth, wind and fire elementary affinities, though earth is uncommon.” Stella sighed loudly. “The imbeciles were rather gleeful until in 1979 the majority of the independent wand-makers fled Britain for the safety of Europe. Suddenly they had a lot of heartstrings but no one to make wands from it.”

“The dragons were still dead.”

“The dragons are still dead.” The single word changed in the sentence brought her uncomfortable shivers as they began to march in a new direction in the maze of trees and ponds. “Worse, the reserves of dragon blood, livers, bones and heartstrings every side tried to stockpile fifteen years ago are drying up and they can’t be replenished. I will not give you the sordid details, but before the Ministry urged me to create a new preserve, there were four existing sanctuaries in the Isles.”

With a twirl of her wand, her guardian conjured a magical representation of Britain with red dots representing the locations of the preserves. Then it zoomed in on Ireland.

“The smallest was the Irish Preserve owned by House McElroy. They were not attacked during the war, but they had only six Welsh Greens and one died six years ago.”

A move of her wand and the map moved to Scotland.

“The second was the Ness Reserve in Scotland, owned by House Cadwallader. Thirty years ago, they had about forty dragons. Now they have a single Hebridean Black and three Welsh Green...I think they have figured wars are not good for business.”

The image shifted to the islands west of Scotland.

“The Hebrides Reserve is owned by our dear Lucius Malfoy,” mused the widow of seven men. “He has done his best to disguise it, but he is down to nine Hebridean Black and fifteen Welsh Green dragons after his atrocious choices while he was tragically Imperiused.”

The tone she used on the last words told Alexandra that her interlocutor was not among the officials who had believed the lies of Draco’s father.

The last dot pointed on Wales.

“House Slughorn owns the Welsh Reserve with their allies and has twenty Green Welsh left.”

Suddenly, the Ministry’s willingness to create a new preserve made far more sense. Eighteen dragons brought by House Zabini from overseas had to be over one-third of the Green Welshs alive in Britain. Fudge and his councillors must have jumped at the idea when it was explained to them.

“When you proposed to them the idea of a new preserve half of the Wizengamot must have been ready to build you a statue.”

Lady Stella Zabini laughed, but there was no smile on her cheeks and the humour was absent.

“Ah, the optimism of children,” the woman said, “I’m afraid you give them too much credit. A lot are paid by Lucius Malfoy to make sure the existing problems aren’t solved and the rest are content to ignore it until no dragon lives. As long as the Hebridean Reserve has few rivals, Narcissa’s husband can manipulate the prices of dragon’s blood and other ingredients as he wishes.”

“But if there is another war...”

Her guardian made the map of the dragon preserves disappear as they continued marching.

“If a war begins, I will send back all my dragons to the ancestral Zabini dragon sanctuary in the Italian peninsula. I know House Slughorn has made similar arrangements with their partners on the continent. The dragons will survive. Not in Britain perhaps, but the local Ministry has proven unable and unwilling to protect them.”

She couldn’t really well argue against this judgement.

“I’m not complaining Stella...but why are you telling me this?”

The smile of Lady Stella Zabini was innocence itself.

“My son doesn’t like the dragons. Is it so strange to share one of my interests with my new ward?”

“Yes,” the thirteen-year-old witch replied bluntly, privately very amused.

“Ah, too bad,” replied the Lady in a voice which told Alexandra that the woman had been Sorted into Slytherin directly during her Welcoming Feast. “We will have to do something about your clothes, however.”

Alexandra felt dread in her heart and she demanded a miracle from the Morrigan...but there was no answer from the Bane of Heroes.

“What about my clothes?”

“My dear, except the bras and the rest of your undergarments, I could give your clothes to Blaise and he wouldn’t complain. You are a young Heiress and if you aren’t travelling with a wardrobe in six trunks, you have not the clothes befitting to your status. Until you’re fourteen every girl is allowed to be a tomboy I suppose...but not under my roof.”

For once, Alexandra didn’t find a retort that wouldn’t make the situation worse. The problem was that it seemed to galvanise her new guardian on this ‘wardrobe strategy’.

“There’s not much time left before September, but I think I can order a new collection from Paris before you leave for Hogwarts. Robes are the priority, but I will give you Muggle and non-Muggle creations to widen your horizons. You will need new skirts and not from those prudish British shops...”

And then the questions started. What were her favourite colours? What sort of clothes had she enjoyed seeing in the shopping malls? Aside from Madam Malkin’s shop, were there any clothes shops she had bought from in Diagon Alley? Alexandra was honestly lost in this tide of questions and it didn’t help that Lady Zabini was sometimes making comments on what she was going to order for her.

“Ah, we arrive to my humble English residence,” said Stella after a new barrage of questions. The raven-haired young witch made a small sound of relief and watched the construction emerge from the trees...and she had to stop, amazed by the sight.

‘Humble residence’? ‘Manor’? The structure in front of her was a bloody castle with at least five floors! And it was not the castle ‘we built a high wall, one tower, ten rooms and we called it a castle’. No, this was a real castle. There was a great avenue from the western side, perhaps for large projects, a sizeable stone fountain which looked French-something in style and fruit trees. But compared to the castle itself, they were just the accessories. Aside from Hogwarts, she had never seen a castle that big – not that she had a lot of locations to make the comparison, but still. The walls were a light grey and there were several large balconies along the entire length, with arcades and statues. Alexandra was not an expert, but many objects and scenes looked like they had been created in perfect marble.

“It’s gigantic...” the exclamation was out of her mouth before she could stop it. “You could bring the entire population of Hogwarts here!”

“More I think,” was the immodest reply of the castle’s owner. “With one or two space-expansion Charms, Zabini Manor can be arranged for seven or eight hundred people.” Stella Zabini shrugged. “But the castle is already far from empty. There are about seventy House Elves and a hundred employees of House Zabini working all year here and depending on the season and the affairs, I sometimes recruit workers for one or two months.”

“Err...it seems a bit too much...”

“Alexandra, you have not seen the moments when the entire House Zabini is gathered in a single place. During these events, a castle like this is crowded.” Was it her imagination or was Blaise’s mother enjoying her embarrassment? “Oh, I must give you the rules because I’m a respectable guardian.”

The last sentence had been pronounced so ironically Alexandra giggled.

“Yes, yes the Wizengamot would no doubt disagree with me,” this appeared to please the Lady of House Zabini a lot. “Rule one: no drugs. It destroys the brains and the magic. You are a powerful young witch with every reason to enjoy life and I forbid you from taking anything to cripple your skills. Rule two: no alcohol until you have passed your OWLS. There are many powerful drinks in our world, and I don’t want you dependant on them. Drinking a lot can be a drug on its own. Rule three: don’t visit the enclosures of the animals in my menagerie without one of the animal-handlers. Old Frederick is sleepy and rather inoffensive, but I have a few species with XXXX-classification and some can be ferocious to unknown visitors. Rule four: the Zabini lands are not a prison but I want you to ask permission before you leave it. I have first-class wards here and I am going to key you into them this evening this evening. Outside, Britain has...security problems, as I’m sure you have heard.”

Alexandra nodded carefully after each point. For the moment, she was not seeing any problem with the rules...well maybe the fourth was going to cause issues if she wanted to hide things from her guardian, but for the moment it was fine.

“Rule five is not something I think I need to tell you...no mistreating of the House Elves. You are not Narcissa’s infernal brat or any spawn from the Traditionalists, but best to make it clear from the start. They are priceless helpers and I do not stand when some tries to hit them.”

This certainly had to be the reason the weird Elf had been trying to strike himself. He was surely a recent acquisition of House Zabini.

“Rule six: if you have problems, here or at Hogwarts, you take some Floo powder and you call me. I can’t promise you I will be available in the next minute, but I have lawyers and former Hit-wizards in my service and they can solve every imaginable problem. It’s best to use them...you might have noticed Albus Dumbledore is not one of your greatest fans.”

They didn’t directly enter the castle. Instead, they appeared to move in a south-eastern direction. And in the continuation of the gigantism of ‘Zabini Manor’, there was a swimming pool which looked to be done in a Greek or Roman style. The size was Olympic, no doubt about it.

“Rule seven: if you want to invite your boyfriends or girlfriends here, I will demand you use the correct contraception spells...”

Alexandra had no mirror on her, but she knew her face had to be bright red after this ‘rule’.

“Rule eight...”

“An otter in the swimming pool?” Alexandra had seen the animals at the zoo during Dudley’s extraordinary birthday where he had ended with the hippo. She was rather surprised to see one here, though. Unlike the dragon, it didn’t look the enclosure of an animal.

“That is my sea lion, Bambi,” announced the dark-skinned Lady with some annoyance for the first time. “And he has absolutely no reason to be here...”

Unfortunately, the culprit, aka the Heir of House Zabini, aka Blaise chose this moment to leave a tent with one large bucket he levitated before him.

The sea lion named Bambi – a massive black-coloured animal which had to weigh hundreds of pounds- sniffed a lot before showing a hungry tongue...and catching in mid-hair the little fish which had been thrown his way.

“Do you want another herring?” asked Blaise, who had not realised his mother was arriving at his back and not to congratulate him on his animal-trainer performance.

“I told you to work on your Hogwarts schoolwork, my son!” Blaise jumped comically in a manner so comical Alexandra mourned the fact she had no camera around her neck. “I don’t think feeding a sea lion is what your teachers gave as homework.”

The future Slytherin third-year took three steps back and unwillingly gave a kick to the bucket. Dozens of herrings landed in the water...not for long because Bambi the enormous sea lion metaphorically tied his napkin and jumped in to eat his holiday feast.

After this scene, Lady Stella Zabini had a smile so dangerous that if Alexandra was in Blaise’s situation, she would rather choose to deal with a dragon than his mother.

“Your excuses are going to be good, or I will give my new ward a Transfiguration human-to-animal lesson with you as the guinea pig...”

**18 August 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Albus Dumbledore had a problem.

Oh he had ten thousands things giving him a headache this summer, but a lot of them could wait until tomorrow or the end of the month.

This specific problem, on the other hand, could not be delayed, Wizengamot emergency session or not, Azkaban prisoners in the wild or not.

In fifteen days, his students would stand in the Great Hall and listen to his words of welcome. The first-years would be sorted into Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. On September 2, they would take their first classes.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, was missing one Professor for their memorable first week.

If he wanted to be optimistic, he could tell himself he had begun with three missing Professors instead of one. He had vacancies for the Care of Magical Creatures elective, and the two slots of DADA.

The first job had been easy to fill. While he was disappointed he could not place Hagrid in a position of influence at Hogwarts, Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank deserved her Mastery in this subject and she had taught in five European schools before returning to Britain. He foresaw no problem with her and this was a relief. Kettleburn had begun to scare his students in the last couple of years. When the former Hufflepuff had received more wounds from dangerous creatures than the clumsiest Aurors had received Dark Curses, retirement was not far.

Recruiting someone to replace Reed had been far more difficult...the violent death of the young American witch was bad enough, but it was Slytherin students who had done the deed and it had considerably decreased the number of candidatures.

June, July, and August put together, he had received three wizards and witches. The first had been a prostitute from Knockturn Alley. The second had been Xenophilius Lovegood...although he realised after twenty minutes the man simply was simply trying a new interview method. The third was a sort of beggar-hermit-druid who loved to eat toxic mushrooms and was a raving lunatic.

It went without saying that the three were completely unsuitable...though the prostitute had apparently the highest standards of three ‘candidates’.

Lacking reliable wizards to teach this cursed subject, Albus had then turned to the Order of the Phoenix. He was reactivating his forces as fast as possible to counter the Dark Forces threatening their world, but they were friends who were not ready for multiple reasons to participate actively. After a few debates and inquiries, Sturgis Podmore had accepted to fill the role of Junior DADA Professor for the 1993-1994 year.

Naturally, this left him without a candidate for the Senior DADA job. Initially, some of the Aurors loyal to him had been his preferred choices, but now Amelia was recalling every Auror she could and upsetting her would hurt his political capital at the worst moment possible. After the fiasco of the Potter audience yesterday, he was not eager to get his fingers burned twice in close succession. It would give Malfoy and his friends too many ideas. The unofficial leader of the Dark was already too smug this month: like a cockroach, he had bribed his way to Fudge and the other Heads. Like the vermin he was, he had conspired and bought enough favours to place his wife at the seat he had been forced to resign from in the Board of Governors.

There were some people he could trust to teach one year. The names of Moody and Lupin were at the forefront of his thoughts. Unfortunately, the two were impossible for different reasons. Moody had nearly killed two Obliviators one month ago after another incident caused by his legendary paranoia. If he came to Hogwarts this year, the parents were going to scream and the *Daily Prophet* was going to be a bloody nuisance. Plus his old friend was more needed than ever to train the new recruits of the Order as the preparations for the war against the Dark were beginning.

Remus Lupin had been his favourite choice before Azkaban. But now, it was politically suicidal. If the Board discovered he hired a werewolf to teach, Remus would be on the way to the execution room before the day was over and his tenure as Headmaster would end at the same time. The majority of the wizards and witches didn’t understand wererats and werewolves had far different cultures and curses. All they saw were the monsters lurking in everyone’s heart. Moreover, Remus was leading his Order-supported anti-vampire forces and with the Shadow Blades at large, he couldn’t afford to put him behind a desk to explain to the Slytherin brats the subtleties of defeating a Boggart.

“Tom has caused me plenty of headaches with his curse, hasn’t he Fawkes?” Albus told his Phoenix. Just after his words to his Light companion, he felt the familiar twinge of the wards informing him someone had arrived.

“My first appointment of the day,” he said sadly to the Phoenix. It was already five in the afternoon and he doubted there would be more. He was thus in the same situation than he had been with Lockhart: refuse the candidate-to-come and risk his opponents finding some unpleasant Dark Wizard he couldn’t refuse or accept it at his risks and perils.

Between the warning and the visitor uttering the password to the gargoyle, he waited eight minutes. This was a good sign. In a straight walk, the aspirant Professors typically arrived from the front doors to his office in a quarter of an hour. The candidate had to be physically fit or he was running.

The question was...

“You,” Albus snarled as he saw the face of the wizard who entered his office.

It had been a decade since he had last seen the man, but he remembered this ugly red hat very well.

“Me,” answered back the foreign wizard. “You didn’t receive my owl?”

Since he had ordered the House Elves to burn every correspondence coming from this wizard, the answer was obviously negative.

“What are you doing in Britain, Erasmus Rincewind?”

“My superiors at the ICW are a bit scared Grindelwald will be heading for your school, old chap!” If he could trust himself not to murder the man, the Elder Wand would have already cast a few humiliating Charms of his own invention. Rincewind sat on a chair without invitation and placed his feet on his desk. “And since I was available, they thought it would be an excellent idea for me to reinforce your school.”

Albus watched the sorry excuse for a wizard with anger. The red hat was old and made the Sorting Hat look like a great novelty. Bright gold letters showing the word ‘WIZZARD’ were stuck on it. The robes Erasmus Rincewind wore had been at some moment or another bright red, but today they were so old, scratched, pierced, and on the end of hundreds of curses that they were an ugly dark red. Old brown boots completed the awful attire. His brown hair and goatee were unkempt and a nightmare for any hairdresser. On his back was a sort of modified crossbow. At a glance, it was a fifth of the size of Hagrid’s weapon.

What was more to say? Ah yes, Erasmus Rincewind was a wizard of Bohemia, born from an English witch, and in the Headmaster’s opinion had been a walking catastrophe during all the wars he had participated in the last sixty years.

“I fail to see how useful you are to stop Dark Wizards,” the Grand Sorcerer retorted rudely. “Every time you fight a Dark Lord or anyone dangerous, a city goes down in flames. I remember Dresden, *Butcher*. Now remove your feet off my desk.”

Naturally, the man ignored his command.

“Albus, Albus...” Rincewind momentarily removed his dirty hat to use it as a fan to get some air. “I will be the first to admit my Fiendfyre attack went somewhat...out of control...”

“Out of control? Dresden was razed! You killed over twenty thousand people in your folly!”

He was the first to admit his duel with Grindelwald had been anything but cheap in human lives, but he had not indiscriminately targeted civilians and children!

But Erasmus smiled. He had the gall to smile!

“Yes, and I never lost much sleep over it.” Once more time the Alchemist fought not to kill this war-criminal where he stood. “The propaganda spoke of innocents, but that was poppycock, as you British say. When they were exterminating the Jews and those undesirables, these people walked in the streets and saluted you with a ‘Heil Hitler!’ When Dark Wizards threw millennia-old curses and devastated Europe, entire magical communities were shouting ‘Hail Grindelwald!’ Yes, I used Fiendfyre to destroy Dresden. Yes, I killed tens of thousands lives. But over sixty of Grindelwald’s officers and over four hundred Prussian war mages who were his primary reserve disappeared in the inferno! Two hundred wizard families were also there and only a very naive strategist would believe the Dark Lord of Nurmengard wasn’t ready to send every wand-wielder he had in a last-ditch effort to stop our offensives!”

“The means can’t justify the end!” Albus roared.

“How nice of you to say that when you stayed at Hogwarts away from the bloodbath for six long years!”

Albus Dumbledore, Defeater of the Dark Lord Grindelwald, watched his interlocutor behind powerful Occlumency shields, taking the time to calm his wrath. His Aura was dangerously flaring, and he could not lose his control like this.

“Enough,” screaming at the unrepentant wizard would not make his change his opinion, that much was evident. “You came here for a reason.”

“The post of the Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor, yes.”

“I will not tolerate your presence in this castle if you teach the students Dark Magic.”

He had expected many things. Denial maybe, or protests that they had to learn Dark Curses if they wanted to efficiently fight Dark Wizards. He had not thought Erasmus Rincewind would explode into a large burst of laughter.

“Oh, Albus...” the Butcher of Dresden chuckled. “It is common knowledge many of your students during the Basilisk incident were throwing lethal curses around. They really don’t need me to teach them forbidden incantations. But very well, I promise I will not teach them Dark Magic. You have my word on it.”

At this moment the Headmaster of Hogwarts wanted to throw the red-robed insolent out the window...but with his cursed luck Rincewind would probably survive and sue him to pay the hospital bills. And he would still lack a DADA teacher.

Should he go to the Ministry and demand they find someone?

No.

Fudge was more difficult to convince than ever and was gathering too much power in his hands to be trusted with this appointment.

“Very well,” the Chief Warlock said with ill-grace. “Hypothetically if you had to teach a class of third-years...”

**19 August 1993, Zabini Manor, England**

In one night, Alexandra decided the best part of her stay at Zabini Manor was without contest the bed. Between the pillow and the sheets, the softness was incredible. It was like an Enchanter had transfigured a cloud and added relaxing Charms to it.

Before this summer, Alexandra had been very satisfied with her Hogwarts bed. Now it felt small and too hard. The moment she had to take the Hogwarts Express, she was transferring the bed to the school...except she had no idea how she was going to make it enter the Ravenclaw tower. The bed was huge and she was sure some Kings had smaller mattress to sleep upon.

But then everything was gigantic in her new bedroom. The room she had been given at MacDougal Manor was far from small. The one here was four times its size and between the cupboards and the rest of the furniture, it was screaming ‘rich’ from the floor to the ceiling. There were multiple magical paintings above her head and on the walls.

As she left the bed and opened the section of the wall which was supposed to contain her clothes, Alexandra wondered if the Indian food of yesterday had not traumatised her brain. In front of her there was so much clothes she had to openly ask the question of how many shops had been raided to provide this collection.

There was...everything. For a minute or two she counted the jeans and arrived at fifty-three. The same experience for the T-Shirts returned one hundred and thirty for answer. Nightwear, skirts, and Hogwarts robes were there along with swimwear, socks, bras and undergarments. There were Quidditch robes, standard robes and different sport clothes.

It was mind-boggling and very generous from Lady Zabini as ninety percent of the clothes had not been hers before today.

It was also a nightmare to choose what she was going to wear today.

Opening the other section, the green-eyed witch had the urge to slam her head on something hard after seeing the mountain of shoes waiting for her. Sneakers, sandals, Hogwarts formal shoes, and of course high heels were represented by the dozens. There had to be more than two hundred pairs of shoes in this wardrobe.

The last door at the end of the bedroom fortunately was not another reserve of clothes. It was apparently her private bathroom...and it had the swimming pool-sized bath, large showers, a golden mirror, and a lot of marble. A Queen could use this bathroom and find nothing to say against it...that was her opinion at least.

If every Slytherin Heir and Heiress lived in this type of castle, Alexandra could guess where the legendary Malfoy arrogance was coming from.

It didn’t solve her clothes problem, though. After a few minutes of deliberation, she found modest underwear, a light blue T-shirt and green shorts plus some sandals. She had wanted something a bit more conservative but while Lady Zabini – or her tailor – had given her a wide variety of clothes many were a bit too girly for her taste.

She tried some new clothes ultimately: there were unlikely to be many witnesses today, save Blaise who would attend Hogwarts in September. The day was already sunny and warm; better to test some of the new summer clothes she had been gifted before Hogwarts before the Scottish winter forced her to go back to heavy-furred cloaks and sweaters.

“And now to find my way back to the breakfast hall...”

It wasn’t a joke to say the distance between her bedroom and the place where the members of House Zabini were taking their meals was sufficient to organise a race. She was on the third floor and maybe a tenth of a mile away. Green carpets covered the floor while expensive paintings and tapestries created a mosaic of colours on the walls. There were models of armour from the last six centuries. The lights were surrounded by sublime creations of crystal. There were a lot of diamonds too behind protected glasses. It was a maze of overabundance and glory.

Fortunately, a giddy House Elf was more than happy to give her the directions and guide her most of the journey, leaving her in near a hall which could have been used for a grand ball but that her hostess used for the breakfast of her family. Half of the ‘breakfast hall’ had mirrors opening to the gardens and the woods surrounding Zabini Manor. As a result, the place was luminous and the air was a perfume to the nose.

She read the menu delivered by another House Elf and ordered a few novelties to go with her favourite food and then walked two minutes to go to the end of the endless brown table where Blaise Zabini was already eating.

“Good morning, Blaise,”

“Good morning,” the Slytherin boy stopped an instant his breakfast to reply. “Your Hogwarts letter has arrived.”

Looking at her plate, the Ravenclaw girl saw there was indeed a familiar letter with the Hogwarts coat of arms and its recognisable ‘H’.

“Oh good, I was wondering if they had not forgotten us this year,” after everything which had happened before June, it would have been a comedy of epic size if they didn’t know when and where the new year would begin...

The protections around the Manor had to be powerful, because the address was rather short in comparison to the two other times she received her Hogwarts letter.

**Miss A. Potter**

**Zabini Manor**

**Cornwall**

The message contained in it – which she read as her plate began to fill with delicious food and her glass received apple juice – had a novelty she had not thought to see at the end of second year.

**Dear Miss Potter,**

**Please note that the new school year will begin on September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King’s Cross station, platform nine and three-quarters, at eleven o’clock.**

**Third-years are permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade during certain weekends. Please give the enclosed permission form to your parent or your guardian to sign.**

**A list of books for next year is enclosed.**

**Yours sincerely,**

**Professor M. McGonagall**

**Deputy Headmistress**

Alexandra abandoned her lecture to eat her breakfast and try to make some discussion with Blaise, who appeared to be content to remain as talkative as he was at Hogwarts: silent like the grave and talkative like the Bloody Baron.

“Will your mother give us the authorisation to Hogsmeade?” she demanded to the dark-skinned boy.

“You don’t have to worry, she will sign the bloody authorisation for you...” grumbled the Zabini heir. “I am not sure she will do it for me. She already confiscated all my pocket money for this month...”

“By the way, what in the name of this country were you thinking inviting your sea lion into your swimming pool? It was amusing, don’t take it wrong, but I don’t see the reason why...”

But Blaise refused to participate further in this mini-conversation and the rest of the breakfast was eaten in silence. Once she had finished devouring what was in her plate, Alexandra read the other papers included in her letter. There were a lot of new books and this year Lockhart wasn’t responsible for it. Third year marked the point where the electives were added to the fundamental classes. According to the older Ravenclaws students, it was the hour where the efforts of the first two years were beginning to tell: the students not serious in their academic performances took Divination, Care of Magical Creatures or Muggle Studies and continued that way until the OWLS, satisfied in their average achievements while the boys and girls unwilling to die for a Quidditch job took Ancient Runes and/or Arithmancy. The book letter had been written by Flitwick and not by McGonagall, by the way.

**Miss A. Potter has chosen Ancient Runes and Arithmancy for third-year electives and will require:**

***The Standard Book of Spells Grade 3* by Miranda Goshawk**

***Intermediate Transfiguration* by Emeric Switch**

***The Art of Defence* by Johannes Von Lutz**

***Rune Dictionary* by Marvin Merger**

***Ancient Runes Made Easy* by Mogamo Laurenzoo**

***Spellman’s Syllabary* by Rosana Amorim**

***Magical Solutions and Antidotes* by Arsenius Jigger**

***Numerology and Grammatica* by Verimus Vaniter**

“What electives are you taking this year?” she demanded of Blaise, hoping the Slytherin was more inclined to reveal this non-familial information. To her satisfaction, he was.

“I’m taking Care of Magical Creatures and Ancient Runes,” Blaise told her, taking another pancake. Alexandra was a bit impressed he was still eating since he had begun before her and was obviously going to finish after. The future Hogwarts third-year witch was aware she did not eat like an ogre, but this was a heavy breakfast all the same. “Care is easy, with the menagerie of the Manor and the preserves we own. If I took the OWL this summer, I think I would achieve an ‘E’ in the class.”

“I suppose you bought some archives from the NEWT students to be so certain,” Alexandra remarked.

“Evidently,” replied the future third-year Slytherin. “I wanted to choose Divination with it, but Mother contacted directly Professor Snape and changed my second elective to Ancient Runes.”

“Divination is taught by a fraud,” this was common knowledge in the Hogwarts common rooms, really.

“But it is an easy OWL,” countered the dark-skinned boy.

“Isn’t it a bit early to consider what is easy or difficult? I mean, OWLS are at the end of fifth year but it’s the electives you choose now which are going to allow us to choose different jobs...”

“Bah, I want...”

And Blaise froze and stopped his sentence before making a total return to the Care of Magical Creatures subject in a loud voice. Perhaps it had to do with his mother entering the hall with a large pile of folders in her hands.

“Have you heard the latest rumour on Care by the way?”

“There were a thousand rumours on Care after the End-of-the-Year Feast,” Lavender Brown and her harpies of the rumour mill had sub-par grades during their exams, but they certainly worked overtime in the ‘gossip’ class to compensate.

“This one was good. It was never completely confirmed, but there was a hint or two the gamekeeper Hagrid wanted to become the new Care Professor. He had even chosen a carnivorous book: *the Monster Book of Monsters*.”

“They could have chosen something more believable,” Alexandra said in a non-amused tone while Lady Stella Zabini set some of her folders at the other end of the mile-long table before coming in her direction. “I suppose Dumbledore can choose whoever he wants as a Professor – Lockhart and Binns are proof enough of that – but honestly, Hagrid is completely unqualified for the job. By the swords of the White Tower, the man was expelled, had his wand broken, and never sat his OWLS!”

The gigantic man was innocent of Myrtle’s murder and the ridiculous accusation he was the heir of Slytherin, but it did not make him qualified at all to be a Professor. Diploma aside, Hagrid loved too many dangerous and frightening beasts for her taste.

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss rumours like this, Alexandra,” the Potter Heiress half-jumped as the hands of her guardian suddenly touched her shoulders. Lady Zabini had been at other end of the hall...she had moved really quickly to cover the distance. “Dumbledore’s choices are contestable at the best of times. Too often, the Board of Governors is screaming when they learn of the final selection, but the Headmaster stamps the final parchment anyway. And the Keeper of Keys Hagrid was on the preliminary list of candidates he transmitted to the Board. Dumbledore chose Professor Grubbly-Prank in the end, but Hagrid was there.”

And now she wondered what sort of drug Dumbledore was sniffing during his free hours. Anybody could see Hagrid was a disaster waiting to happen if he was named Professor. Assuming he was competent, Slytherins like Draco Malfoy or Theodore Nott would try anything to get rid of him.

“But this is a lovely morning and I don’t want to waste it speaking of Dumbledore’s mistakes. I trust you have slept well, Alexandra?”

“The bed is incredibly soft and welcoming,” she confirmed.

“Excellent,” Stella Zabini clapped her hands before moving on to the other side of the table and kissing her son on the cheek. For this day, she was in a sumptuous black robe with a necklace of diamonds around her neck.

Blaise had placed his Hogwarts letter under one of the many napkins, but the hideout was discovered in mere seconds and the content of the letters was read under the powerless eyes of Blaise.

“Ah Hogsmeade,” Lady Zabini purred. “A small and isolated village lacking in shops and attractions but away from the Professors and exciting for lovely meetings...”

And then the change came, brutal and with an iron fist.

“I don’t think I will authorise you to go there, my son.” The form was put back on the napkin as she read the list of required books for third years.

“Mother...” Blaise’s voice was not as whiny as the one of a certain Draco Malfoy, but the intention was there. “I can’t be the only Slytherin third-year to stay in the castle on the week-ends!”

It was the wrong excuse to advance, as the smile of his mother grew larger.

“Oh, if that is your great fear, don’t be so worried. I spoke with Lady Crabbe last week and she had ideas very close to mine.”

“But...”

“You are going to finish your homework in an acceptable and timely manner and stop skipping the lessons with your tutor.” Her tone had not changed or displayed anger, but the steel under it could not be missed. “If your efforts are acceptable until September 1, I will consent to sign your Hogsmeade authorisation. Your pocket money will remain in my possession until October. And no, you don’t deserve an ‘E’ in a Care of Magical Creatures OWL exam. I would give you a ‘D’ for your performance with Bambi yesterday.”

Alexandra was very glad she was not drinking or eating, because having the confirmation the wards allowed Lady Zabini to hear the conversation she had with Blaise was a big surprise and left her with her mouth wide open. Blaise was less surprised, but his face revealed he had not expected to see his words in private arrive to his mother’s ears.

“Finish your breakfast and go to your study room. Alexandra and I have confidential information to talk about,” Blaise didn’t talk back, but his eyes and the rest of his visage told her how enthusiastic he was about doing his Hogwarts essays. On the one hand, homework when you had superb weather and a park like this was not fun. On the other hand, it was the eighteenth of August and there were about two weeks before they returned to Hogwarts.

She stood up and her magical guardian took the ledgers in her arms before leading her to a new hall after a three-minute walk. The moment she entered the new hall, Alexandra almost collapsed. There were jewels everywhere. Diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and other gemstones she didn’t know the names of but had to cost a fortune. The magic levels in the room were also ten times stronger. There were wards and shining runes everywhere. Noticeable details: there were no windows in this room and no living being except Lady Stella Zabini and Alexandra.

“Welcome to the Hall of Diamond, Alexandra,” said her hostess, setting her ledgers on a middle-sized table so exquisite three or four houses could be exchanged for it. “It is here I discuss the financial affairs.”

Ah, so it was already time for a financial lesson.

“Shouldn’t we go to Gringotts and see Senior Accountant Grimjaw?” she asked politely. The old goblin was guarding all the relevant information, no?

“I am just returning from Gringotts,” declared Stella Zabini. “These are your ledgers.”

Of the massive pile, the two ledgers at the top were indeed titled in huge letters ‘POTTER’.

“The Senior Accountant had nothing but good things to say about you. It’s always good to know you impressed the banker-warrior, and you have handled your finances well for the moment.”

“Ha...thank you.”

Lady Zabini opened a new ledger without looking at it, as she was still looking Alexandra directly in the eyes.

“You are old enough in my opinion to handle your trust vault on your own, Alexandra. While I would have preferred your parents gave you smaller monthly earnings instead of the one thousand Galleons upon your birthday, this gold transfer will continue until your seventeenth birthday. Albus Dumbledore added his fine of two thousand Galleons last month.”

“I was aware of it,” and the daughter of Lily Potter was proud about it. It was for the Conquest spoils the Headmaster was paying, but in her mind, it was a nice refunding for the decade he ‘forgot’ her at Privet Drive.

“Vault 517...your Conquest vault...no one can touch it until your marriage. I am sorry, but your previous magical guardian left no loopholes on this one. Your family vault - Vault 72 - may be unlocked before the end of the year, I have put some pressure on a dozen of Ministry assistants, but it is going to take time.”

“If I am able to access Vault 72...what will happen?”

A dozen new ledgers were levitated in front of her.

“I won’t dictate your decision, but I strongly advise you move a sizeable part of your gold to Gringotts Paris. The London Ministry has proven it can’t be relied upon when it comes to defending and enforcing its own laws. A vault there will leave you a safe haven in case the Ministry turns on House Potter...again.”

Alexandra frowned. What her guardian said made a lot of sense...if Fudge or one of his assistants ordered all her vaults to be closed, she would be left with what she had in her pockets and charity. It was...not a lot.

“Can Vault 517 be transferred the same way?”

The dark-robed witch became thoughtful and consulted her ledgers before shaking her head.

“I will have to consult the laws, but I don’t think so. The Ministry can very traditionalist and the Conquest laws are ancient. I do not think the French would accept tying it to an eventual marriage either, so the British Ministry is likely to kill the move the moment they hear of it.” Stella Zabini made her long nails click on the flawless table.

“Anyway, I don’t have a vault at Paris.”

“You personally don’t have one,” corrected her guardian. “But House Potter owned one. It took a detour to Gringotts Paris and one or two bribed officials but I discovered your family opened a vault there in 1978. A present from your father to your mother, I believe.” New ledgers were opened, these ones in bright blue and gold colours. “Ah, here it is. Your father offered some pre-wedding gifts and three percent of the total shares of *Capes d’excellence*...”

“I know it is a clothes shop in France,” she was suddenly wary as Stella Zabini stood up from her large seat and placed her one of her hand on Alexandra’s.

“Alexandra, *Capes d’excellence* can be described as a...lingerie shop. It is a very nice shop of lingerie for young and old women who love exotic action in the bedroom.”

Alexandra reddened instantly under the chuckle of her guardian, who fortunately decided not to mock her for her tomato-like shade.

“Unlike Zonko and Butterbeer, the owners of this shop were very gracious and paid yearly the return for the initial investment. I transferred this morning the ownership of the Vault and the legal rights to your identity. You are now Vault 7043’s sole proprietor, adding approximately eighty-six thousand Galleons to your balance.”

Well, she wasn’t going to complain...

“That seems a lot of money,” she commented.

“Not really,” Stella Zabini said. “*Capes d’excellence*’s owner has opened two other shops in Southern France and one in Spain. We are also speaking of a period of fifteen years without anyone touching this vault. You are earning something like five thousand and seven Galleons per year thanks to this lingerie of good taste.”

“But it was a good investment, no?”

“Oh, absolutely,” the Head of House Zabini in Britain agreed. “It would have been even more profitable if your parents had bought more shares and invested in other businesses, however.”

Alexandra wasn’t going to say anything against this point of view. It seemed the French government had far more respect for their laws than the British one did and while the Potter businesses had disappeared long time ago in England, the French part had been waiting for her...although the small size of it must have played a part too.

“There is a good chance we may spend part of the winter holidays in France. If you come, I will make you visit Paris and introduce you to certain associates.”

“I will think about it L...Stella.”

“Good,” the charming smiles were impressive, despite knowing she was in front of a Slytherin worthy of the name. “Now, *Capes d’excellence* is a good investment, but the two other firms in your portfolio are not. I don’t know if you are aware, but Zonko’s is owned by...”

“Lord Sirius Black,” she finished.

“Yes,” This time Stella Zabini didn’t bother opening one of her ledgers and instead looked directly at her very seriously. “He bought enough shares of Zonko’s to Bilton Bimes in 1983 to be granted ownership. It was an unsound investment, and I am generous here. Zonko’s Joke Shop continued to lose a lot of money after the civil war.”

“They are the only joke shop I know in Magical Britain,” Alexandra tried to remember if she had seen other shops, but she honestly couldn’t remember any other shop selling prank material like Zonko’s.

“This is because the Wizengamot has voted uncountable laws to prevent foreign investors from seizing the market. Zonko’s has four branches: London, Hogsmeade, Edinburgh, and Cardiff. And under Sirius Black, they have not changed their methods. They are a lair of conservatism, mediocrity and failure. Their 1985 ‘collection’ was the last time they tried to put new goods on the market and they were anything but a success. I think you know better than I how dismal the final result was.”

“Yes, I have heard of it. Fireworks exploding too soon, disgusting pranks whose counter-spells don’t function, innocent potions that are potentially lethal if you’re allergic to the wrong ingredient...”

There was a reason why the Weasley Twins were among the rare students to use these products: only they had the inventiveness – or as some might say, the madness – to alter the products of said collection.

“I was not aware of the last point,” huffed her guardian. “Anyway, Zonko’s has survived for so long because there is no competition against them and the joke market is still important. Sirius Black must be losing a lot of money with this black prank,” the choice of words made Alexandra smile, “but there is no money to find in this enterprise. As your guardian, it is my advice you sell your Zonko’s shares and let someone else drink this poisoned cup.”

Alexandra played with her hair in contemplation for a few minutes. Yes, she had no love for Sirius Black and anyway it was clear that since the death of her mother, House Potter had not received a Knut from the investment in Zonko’s. But did she really want to sell?

“I have two questions.” The Potter Heiress said after a long silence. “If I sell, how much money will I earn? And what sort of investment will you propose I do with it L...Stella?”

“Would you mind if I check one of your ledgers?” Alexandra pushed the Potter file towards Lady Zabini. “Let’s see...you own eight hundred shares of Zonko’s Joke Shop. In 1979, James Potter bought them for forty-eight Galleons each. Hem...” A magical calculator was conjured from a move of her guardian’s wand. “This cost him thirty-eight thousand and four hundred Galleons. He must not have a lot of flair, poor Lord.”

“How so?”

Stella Zabini opened a new folder, this one in complete black and handed her a series of parchments. Alexandra grimaced reading them. She was ready to bet the information on these papers had not been obtained legally, but there were reports of Zonko’s employees and several problems and failures they had. The oldest was from 1985 and the newest was from 1992.

“I suppose my shares will not be sold at the price my father bought them.” Learning her father had been a horrible businessman barely raised an eyebrow after all the proof she had.

“Almost certainly not,” convened the older woman. “But I think I can find buyers for thirty Galleons per share. Maybe a bit more, but there is no guarantee. It would give you a nice little prize of...twenty-four thousand Galleons for your Paris Vault and you could invest in shops and businesses which will not try to embezzle you. I am not sure I will be able to give you a complete list before the end of this summer, so this may be something to discuss over the winter holidays.”

“Tempting,” before she decided that the joke Zonko’s had given to her family was a prank which lasted far too long. “Okay, I will sell the Zonko’s shares. Where do I have to sign?”

The next hour was spent writing a lot of formal documentation for Grimjaw, for Zonko, for her personal use, for Lady Zabini, for the Ministry, and for a lot of people. Magical Britain was consuming a lot of parchment, if this simple sale was any indication.

“What about Butterbeer?” she asked once this long writing trial was over. For official documentation, quills were the only authorised instrument of writing.

“The firm is not winning more money than usual, but they are in good financial health. The breweries are owned by House Parkinson.”

Alexandra internally groaned. Parkinson. This was the family of Pansy, aka Draco’s beloved, aka the pug-face and someone the Exiled had excellent reasons to dislike. The incentive was definitely there to sell too if she couldn’t have some money back.

“I can contact Lord Parkinson in your name,” Stella Zabini proposed. “I am not without influence and you aren’t a ward of Albus Dumbledore anymore.”

By the accentuation she put on the latter point, this may be the more important issue.

“Fine,” Alexandra replied. She didn’t like it, but House Potter had lost too much of its businesses to sell one just because the leading House included ‘reformed Death Eaters’.

She stood from her cushioned seat, wondering how House Zabini had managed to make seats so comfortable. Neither Hogwarts nor Morag’s parents had such incredible comfort.

“An instant, Alexandra...I don’t think you have received ‘The Talk’ yet...”

The predatory expression of Lady Stella convinced Alexandra that, while not knowing what she was speaking about, she was better off somewhere else right now! She tried to run towards the door...and for the first time in months, the Basilisk-slayer was not fast enough.

**24 August 1993, Diagon Alley, London, England**

Morag liked Diagon Alley. It was large. There were a lot of libraries and interesting shops. It was the place she had bought her wand. Her first two years buying her Hogwarts robes and her school supplies had been great.

The MacDougal Heiress liked Diagon Alley, but she was beginning to dislike the atmosphere and the people who lived in it. By Merlin and Morgana, yes Azkaban Prison had been attacked. But there were three escaped prisoners free, not three hundred! And yet the wizards and witches were moving under the bright warm sun like the end of Britain was next week.

It was getting ridiculous; she had to support Alexandra on this. The fear-inducing articles of the Daily Prophet aside, there were entire walls covered with wanted posters of the Azkaban prisoners as far as her eyes could see and she had chosen this section of Diagon Alley because it was calm and away from the main street.

It was not like they had a choice. As long as the Exiled were in the sight of the brilliant folk including ninety-nine percent of the wizards and witches of Britain, they were not at peace. Wizards like the Ministry officials spat in front of them. Insults rained on their heads. Some people had even thrown rotten vegetables and other objects belonging in the dustbin – though their lack of precision meant her robes and those of her friends were still pristine.

These displays did not make her proud to be a witch of the British Isles. By the dirty windows of the library *Lexden Books*, Morag had the feeling she could see a shadow of what Diagon Alley had looked like when the Death Eaters reigned by terror and fear over the scared masses.

“I am surprised you didn’t begin to curse right and left,” she said over her shoulder before turning around and watching Alexandra read a Charms book she had just paid five Sickles for.

Her friend closed the book in her hands with a sonorous clap before finding a seat next to her.

“It wouldn’t do any good,” there was some resignation in Alexandra’s voice. “I could curse them I suppose...but that is just they are waiting for, isn’t it? The crowd wants to see me as the daughter of a Death Eater. They don’t want evidence I am guiltless.”

“And Bellatrix Lestrange’s relatives can’t be easily insulted,” added Nigel while looking at a section publishing the works of ancient authors on diverse magical creatures. “Sirius Black is THE Light Lord. Andromeda Tonks was thrown out of the Black family for marrying a Muggle-born. And whether they are angry or not, people know better than to target the Malfoys.”

“Yes, they are not targets who can’t retaliate,” she tried to make her tone light but she felt angry at this cowardice. These men and women had cheered when the Basilisks were killed. Now one escape later they were all in arms against Alexandra. Ironically, no one was paying attention to Grindelwald’s escape anymore. The Azkaban break-out was the subject of every conversation in the news and the rumours.

“Don’t worry, I have decided to try a new method,” declared Alexandra with a smile which did not bode well for those she didn’t like. “You remember Binns’ lesson on the 1604 Goblin Rebellion?”

“Absolutely not,” replied Nigel in a falsely offended manner. “You want us to remember something Binns said?”

“My deepest apologies,” Alexandra stuck her tongue at the only boy of their group. “To be honest, I didn’t remember it either, but our great and useless History book gave two full pages on it and it had some interesting information.”

“What kind of interesting information? When the goblins revolted in the past, it was always massacre and murder on both sides.”

“Oh yes, but before drawing their halberds and other sharp weapons on this one, they increased their banking interests by five hundred percent.”

Err...this was not as boring as Binns’ lecture, but she wasn’t seeing the point.

“You are not a banker, Alex.”

“But I can repay the insults with interest,” retorted her friend, drawing a little book from her pockets. “Between your parents and Lady Zabini, I have been able to collect a lot of names today. And while I do not have Hermione’s perfect memory, I can remember the insults and accusations they sent me.” The green eyes looked dark, and Morag wasn’t convinced the small candles of the library were responsible for this light effect. “When they come back to ask for my help, and we all know this will happen at some point or another, I will make them pay for it and the final cost for my help will not be cheap.”

“Vindictive,” judged Nigel.

“They deserve it,” Alexandra shrugged and rolled her shoulders. “I tried to be a hero. But this country doesn’t want heroes. Dumbledore wants sheep. Fudge wants yes-men. The *Daily Prophet* wants a scapegoat. The Death Eaters want everyone down on their feet to acknowledge how great and mighty they are. So be it. I am an Heiress of a Most Ancient House and we have far more important things to deal with.”

“Bah, don’t worry it will stop soon enough. Either Longbottom or Malfoy will do some stupid thing and they will forget you exist. Let’s speak of other things. We want to know how big Zabini Manor is.”

“Oh it’s gigantic alright. I think it’s six times the size of MacDougal Manor.”

“That big?” Morag asked a bit vexed. To be overshadowed by a Most Noble House of very recent arrival on the British shores vexed her. “I know you have given us some description in your letters but...”

Alexandra gave her a sardonic smile.

“House Zabini’s house motto should be ‘too much is never enough’. Their manor is in reality a big castle and I think it has the defensibility of one. The whole park has so many wards I can’t count them, and they have four swimming pools in addition to the aquarium of their menagerie. Stella Zabini maintains immense fruit and legume gardens, and she sells them to nearby villages twice per week. They have the latest magical innovations from the continent and the Americas. Fluid-rune conjuration, weather-climate stabilisers, and arithmantic-analysers are bought by the dozens. I think in one month the magic used for the manor and its surroundings could be used for over five hundred families easily.”

Nigel whistled and Morag had not the strength to send him a black glare.

“It must be nice, living there.”

“It is; I am love with my new bed,” agreed Alex. “And don’t get me wrong, I like this life of castle and luxury. I can run in the park in the morning, fly with my broom without risk in the afternoon and swim when I want. But the decorations, the sculptures and the rest...it is often too much.”

“New rich,” the Irish Heiress said. But Alexandra shook her head in a silent ‘no’.

“I don’t think House Zabini has been poor for the last century. The foundations of their...manor...were built around the 1910s and while they have done a lot of renovations since, I can tell you there was already money behind them when they decided to install themselves in Britain. There are ancient armours and swords in the weapon collections a lot of non-magical collectors would kill or sell their souls to have.”

The explanations and the details of Zabini Manor continued for several minutes. Morag was really impressed, not much by the Zabini treasure – as Alexandra had remarked, too much was too much – but her friend had a really good memory to note the disposition of the rooms, their importance, and sometimes the little details no one else would have considered.

Following a lovely repeat of the ‘sea lion’ incident, Nigel asked his first question in several minutes.

“Do you think Blaise is someone reliable?”

“Absolutely not,” Alexandra licked her lips. “Despite living close to him for several days, I don’t think we will ever be close. He’s not talkative and we don’t have the same priorities. He’s an Heir tolerable compared to Draco ‘wait until I tell my father’ Malfoy, but...”

“But that’s a very low bar, we know.” Morag smirked. “And the Black Widow?”

“Did you know she had concentrated most of her shares and activities under the name ‘Black Widow Jewels and Enchanting’? I really don’t know what to think about this woman. She’s a Slytherin, a true Slytherin and not those trolls’ cousins we have in the dungeons each September. One moment she looks like her reason to live is shoes and robes, the next she is able to point the flaws of certain politics and financial strategies in non-magical culture.”

“Did she kill her seven husbands?” Nigel in good apprentice journalism had plunged on *the* question.

“I’m not sure on the first,” his Ravenclaw-Sorted friend confessed. “He was Blaise’s father and was caught in 1981 in one of the worst Death Eater raids on London. She fled to the continent in the aftermath, leaving Zabini Manor defended by private security forces for the last months of the war.”

“And the others?”

“Oh, she killed them all right. I can buy one was an unlikely accident, but six husbands meeting tragic deaths in curious and nearly impossible to replicate methods? No, my magical guardian killed her husbands, no hesitation about it. The problem is proving it and I have absolutely no clue how she managed to kill them.”

“Surely...there...are...similarities...” huffed Hermione, carrying a pile of books so high it forced the respect.

“Hermione be careful, you are going to hurt your back,” said gently Alexandra. “And no, they aren’t. The first husband was killed in a Death Eater attack of 1981 and he was a Ministry official with no fortune to his name. The second was the cousin of an Indian self-proclaimed ‘maharaja’ and tried to hunt a dangerous beast of the region in 1983. It was the beast which won the fight. Four years later, she married a Brazilian adventurer, but he ended up falling from the top of a tower while she was at a ball in presence of a thousand witnesses. The fourth was a Spanish banker or something like that. The Lady married him in 1990 and he was killed in an official duel against a more experienced opponent two months later. The fifth was a professional Quidditch player of the Netherlands team. He had his head pulverised by a Bludger during a friendly game against Germany in 1991. The sixth was a Department Head of Lithuania and a Dark Heirloom he had illegally confiscated blew him up three days after the ceremony. The seventh...the seventh was working in a dragon preserve, but this year he began to receive dangerous mail from anonymous parties who were unhappy with his judgement on the Portuguese political scene. He was murdered by the Killing Curse and they never found the assassin.”

Morag tried to think about each murder a bit non-conventionally, but unfortunately Alexandra was right: the deaths of the seven husbands were only suspicious because the seven men were found dead one after the other.

“You should be careful. Just in case,” she advised her friend as Nigel helped Hermione carry her pile of books to the librarian.

“I will be, but I don’t think I have a lot to fear. Whatever reasons Lady Zabini had to win my guardianship, she can’t kill me while I’m underage and her ward. The Ministry would confiscate half of her fortune the moment I’m dead and the Aurors are waiting for a reason to send her to prison.” Alexandra let out a long breath. “I will be prudent, but I think I was more in danger at Privet Drive. When I stayed at Privet Drive, I’m sure Dumbledore would have blamed the Dursleys if I was injured or worse.”

They went out of the library and marched into an abandoned backyard before waiting for Nigel and Hermione to come out. Next stop was the restaurant where parents and guardians waited for them.

“Let’s pray then that you will have no reason to request her presence at Hogwarts before the winter holidays.”

“Yes...” Alexandra made a strange grimace. “She gave me the ‘Talk’, you know.”

“No...” Morag laughed before giggling at Alexandra’s blush. “Oh dear, the birds and the bees? The entire ‘education’?”

Most of the time she couldn’t make fun of Alexandra, but this time she was willing to make an exception.

“And more. She gave me a whole load of magazine images and private photos...and it wasn’t limited to boy-girl relationships.”

“Oh, poor girl,” she was forced to repress her laughter before Alexandra’s piteous expression. “Did she try to determine your...kissing affinities?”

“I refuse to answer that question without a lawyer,” replied testily the black-haired girl, not noticing she was falling further into her trap.

“Okay, in our year, who would you fancy kissing?”

“Morag!”

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

Alexandra finished the last pool length and climbed out of the water with a large breath of relief. She was not scared of large bodies of water anymore, but she would be lying if she said she preferred it over running or flying.

The green-eyed girl had nothing against waiting a quarter of an hour in a small-sized pool, but swimming endless pool lengths was not really fun. She forced herself to do a bit more day after day, though. It was unlikely she would take a teleport-plunge in the Black Lake a second time, but it was better to be prepared. Besides, the hours spent swimming were - according to the lifeguard - training different muscles and parts of the body than the ones she used for her other physical activities.

A glance at the great magical clock at the other end of the pool informed her there was one hour before dinner. Alexandra stretched her arms and her legs in a few exercises before pushing her lounger away from the implacable sun. Finding a towel, she lounged on the summer seat.

For several minutes, she stayed immobile, listening to her surroundings and enjoying the cries of the animals and birds in the distance. Maybe one of them was Atalanta. Her white owl had decided to search an owl worthy of her attentions and imposed a new hierarchy among the dozens of owls living in the park surrounding Zabini Manor. The House Elves had many stories to share about ‘Her Great White Owlishness’.

Even hidden from the sun, her new green swimsuit was rapidly dry. There had been other sets in her bedroom, but Alexandra had decided this emerald one-piece was the best of the lot. The others...were too revealing for her. The black-haired witch modified the inclination of the lounger. With her left hand, she levitated a History book she had borrowed from one of the Zabini libraries and began to read from where she had stopped the last time. The Gaelic language was a different variant from the one Morag had helped her to learn, but she was progressing well in her opinion. The content gave her knowledge on the ancient culture of wizards and witches of Britain. The manipulation of Ogham runes was addressed and it gave her a few ideas for Ancient Runes.

The noise of a window opening and closing caused her to momentarily abandon her reading to see if it was her guardian returned from the emergency session of the Wizengamot she had departed for in the morning, but instead she saw Blaise descend the white-grey marches leading to the swimming pool.

“I finished Snape’s eternally-damned Potions essay!” announced the dark-skinned Slytherin to whoever had the ears to listen. “FREEEE!”

Blaise Zabini was not jumping in joy, but for the normally reserved and bored wizard, this exclamation was the equivalent of a Hufflepuff or a Gryffindor organising a hell of a party in the common room.

 “You realise there are just three more days before we return to Hogwarts, right?” Alexandra asked from her lounger.

“But it will be three days of fun without homework!” A fist was raised in a good attempt to show his victory over parchment and the ruinous homework ordered by the Professors.

Alexandra touched her nose and rolled her eyes before returning to her book. The difficulty of the coursework was rising year after year; this might be one of the rare things all four Houses agreed upon.

This was why she ignored Blaise’s footsteps until he placed another lounger next to hers, his shirt removed and wearing new black swimming shorts instead of his usual expensive clothes.

“Draco is going to try to recover the leadership of the second-years,” he affirmed as she reached page two hundred and forty.

Alexandra was so unimpressed by this sentence she smiled and didn’t judge it worthy of an answer.

“This is serious.”

“Please,” she continued learning about the different Gaelic staffs which had preceded the wands they used today. “Draco Malfoy is finished. House Ravenclaw may not speak with a single voice, but by June one of the points we all agreed upon was that your blonde-haired brat deserved to drown in a boiling cauldron. If his father wasn’t an ‘Imperiused Death Eater’ and his mother a Black daughter, someone would have murdered him this year.”

“His mother has pulled many strings. He will have Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson.”

Alexandra placed the bookmark on page two hundred and forty-one before closing the book.

“And?” The Potter Heiress said in a lazy tone. “Let’s assume he still has the two gorillas and his dedicated fan-girl with him. I don’t see where the danger is. His two bodyguards finished at the bottom of the rankings. Parkinson is the equivalent of a Slytherin Lavender Brown in talent and she’s less useful, I think.”

“But with the escape of Bellatrix Lestrange, the Carrows and Bulstrode may be tempted to rally to his side again.”

“That’s a rather big assumption,” Alexandra replied unconvinced. “Nott is also the son of a poor ‘Imperiused Death Eater’. But why should I care? Malfoy has put thousands of hours convincing everyone in Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor he was an arrogant and cowardly little shit. If he manages to take control of several Slytherins this year, it will just prove Slytherins have no cunning and no intelligence.”

Blaise winced hearing the barb, but didn’t disagree.

“I think he intends to be a bit more subtle this year,” the Heir of House Zabini revealed. “I know he has already sent a letter to Flint in order to resign from the Slytherin Quidditch Team.”

“I’m amazed by the depth of his sacrifice,” Alexandra replied sarcastically. “The only reason Flint didn’t fire him at the end of the year was because he was busy filling the empty slots and he had no time recruiting other players. But it was not a secret Malfoy was out after the last match. He didn’t catch the Snitch once and most of the time it was his arrogance which caused the defeat of your Quidditch team.”

“And the Junior Death Eaters of last year? You don’t care about them?”

“If Ardoch, Blackford, Warrington, and Montague dare to try a stunt like the one they did in the service of the Heir of Slytherin again, I will make sure nobody will find the corpses.”

The carnage of the Chamber had been enough. There had been too many deaths and too much of the bloodshed had been on her hands. But if the survivors decided to return to their lethal games, there would be a reckoning. Sparing them had put the Slytherins on probation.

This was not a second chance.

“Daphne says the alliance proposal is still possible.”

Alexandra chuckled.

“This is serious!”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it is,” after all if there was a complete opposite to the Weasley Twins at Hogwarts, the Greengrass Heiress was in good position to claim the title. “But I don’t think the situation has fundamentally changed since our last conversation. Daphne will do whatever she does because it is in her interests. Trusting her to do anything else would be sheer stupidity on my part.”

“It is not exactly like that...”

“If you were thrown into an arena with a dragon, would you trust Daphne to jump in to save your life?”

“Err...” and Blaise knew Daphne far better than her. This only convinced her that this was the correct path.

“Ah, your mother is back. And just in time for dinner,” she added as she looked at the golden magical clock near the swimming pool.

Standing from her lounger, she went to one of the cabins ten feet away to replace her swimsuit with something more appropriate for dinner. When she climbed the marches to the dining table on the terrace, the expression on her guardian’s visage told her the news from the Ministry wasn’t good.

She was right.

“Fudge wants the Dementors to be stationed around Hogwarts.”

If Lady Stella Zabini hadn’t been so serious, Alexandra would have replied ‘and I want a ten-flavour ice-cream in ten seconds but that doesn’t mean I will get it’.

But she was serious and Alexandra had seen Fudge before. This latest decision was truly the norm for their wise and benevolent Minister of Magic. Next he was going to have a more brilliant idea. Like stationing Basilisks around London and say there was no way this was going to cause any deaths.

“Doesn’t he need a Wizengamot vote for that?” She demanded aghast. After a few days of reflection, she had accepted Stella Zabini’s arrangement: her guardian would send her letters at Hogwarts succinctly explaining the laws about to be voted and Alexandra would decide if she was for or against before sending Atalanta back with her opinion. It was going to kill her free time, but if she wanted to somewhat understand the mess of British politics, it was not like she had a choice.

“Our dear Minister made the argument Britain’s security is at risk,” if Fudge was somehow to teleport ten feet away from her now, he would be a dead man judging by the voice of her hostess. “For reasons he has not judged useful to share with us, the man is convinced Bellatrix Lestrange is trying to kill Neville Longbottom. His decision was made an executive edict and we lacked the quorum to depose a motion of censure.”

Interesting...Neville was a big target for any of Voldemort lieutenants and supporters, but so was the Minister, Dumbledore, and any official who had participated in the war against Voldemort. Why him specifically?

And why in the name of the Morrigan did he choose Dementors? These were XXXXX-class Dark Creatures!

“Has there been no one to protest this idiocy?”

“People are terrified, Alexandra.” Stella Zabini opened a red bottle of wine and poured herself a generous quantity in her glass before drinking it in one go. “Make no mistake the Ministry is weak and corrupt. When Voldemort was vanquished, the people in charge began to forget a miracle had saved their incompetent heads. Afterwards they spent twelve years completely mismanaging the finances and ruining the reputation of Britain internationally.”

“But...”

“Amelia Bones was sacked yesterday from her job at the head of the DMLE because she refused to approve Fudge’s idea.” The black hair of the British-Venetian witch shone under the dying light of the sun. “Rufus Scrimgeour is the new DMLE Director and Corban Yaxley is the new Chief Auror. I can bet you a million Galleons those two aren’t going to naysay Fudge.”

It was on these depressing thoughts dinner was served and this time all the talent of the Chief House Elf – who was insisting she called him ‘Chief’ and had apparently learned the art of cooking with renowned French cooks - was not sufficient to stop the morose thoughts. Lady Zabini told them she would know more tomorrow, but without a Wizengamot vote, her hands and those of the Lords and Ladies able to think on their own were useless.

For once she didn’t go back to her bedroom or to the library once the meal was over. After the bad news, Alexandra wasn’t in the mood to read a book. It was not yet night and the park was easy to navigate after several days of jogging in the alleys. She rapidly found Atalanta and the next half-hour was spent giving her owl treats and petting her owl – or her white bird was authorising her to caress her perfect feathers, everything was a question of perspective.

When Atalanta flew in the direction opposite to the manor, it was time to go back to the castle. Alexandra had not taken a watch with her, but she was sure it was late. Here and there candles and minuscule fairies were providing small sources of light but it left a lot of darkness.

Alexandra was in a far better mood now...and she forgot to turn left to find the most direct path to Zabini Manor. Instead she turned right...and found herself before the wards protecting the enclosure of the dragon.

Realising her mistake, she watched where the benches were and decided to turn on what had to be the same path she had taken on her arrival here with Lady Zabini before...

There was a powerful roar and a column of fire mounted in the night, lighting everything in a large radius. Alexandra jumped in fear. What in the name of Erebor? The dragon had been sleepy for more days than she had been here and the dragon-handlers were convinced ‘Old Frederick’ was on his last days.

In her humble opinion, the Green Welsh looked very much alive, thank you. Alexandra was ready to run and warn the handlers to get ready to displace the fire-breathing reptile to the preserve when a second firestorm erupted from the distant maw.

The fire was so bright and powerful she had no difficulty seeing the cousin of Smaug the Terrible. The wings were gigantic as they were unfurled. The claws and the fangs looked far sharper than when the dragon had been sleeping. The long tail was striking the air like a massive whip.

And then the dragon half-closed its maw and *spoke*.

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

**Author’s note**: and just like that, I made another cliffhanger... (Evil grin).

The next chapter will end this copious summer of 1993, and then the Hogwarts Express and third year will be ready to start.

Links for the story:

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

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