**Chapter 57**

**Plans within Plans**

**9 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It was very late when Marcus finished his Charms essay. The Common Room was nearly empty. And the rare Slytherins who looked half-awake were probably mere minutes away from deciding their place was in their bed.

Had it taken him so long to complete the homework Flitwick had given them on illusions? It hadn’t felt like it, but the antique clock on the wall was saying otherwise. Slowly, the seventh-year Slytherin closed his ink pot and rolled the parchments after verifying everything was dry and neat. It wouldn’t do to copy the long paragraphs once again after several hours of research and difficult writing.

Well, one thing was sure: it was far too late to even think he was going to play Quidditch this evening. No, scratch that, the hour was so late that the evening was over, now it was night.

The Captain of the Quidditch team wondered if he had the motivation to read the journalist commentaries of the latest League games. Not that it was going to give him much, apart from a good laugh at whatever new problem had plagued the Chudley Cannons when they had suffered a catastrophic defeat against the Montrose Magpies.

His thoughts were musing on this when four out of the six students left the room and went to their dorms. This would have been suspicious by itself; obviously the normal behaviour was one deciding it was a good time to sleep and the rest of the older students one by one following with composed dignity. House Slytherin’s students were not moving in herds like the Hufflepuffs.

Seconds later, his suspicions were more than justified as the last two students, who also happened to be Annabeth Blackford and Adrian Pucey, took their seats and moved them to his table before casting several silencing charms in the direction of the dorm’s stairs.

“This feels suspiciously like an ambush,” he commented with a smirk. Adrian returned it. The Blackford Heiress didn’t.

“I suppose it is,” agreed his best Chaser. “But corridors have a tendency to leak information these days. I don’t want our conversation to be the subject of conversation for the Gryffindors next breakfast. And if we had done it earlier in the common room, we couldn’t have talked without an interruption from unwelcome parties.”

Flint sighed. Sometimes he wondered if it wouldn’t have been simpler to simply accept the Hat’s proposal and go with Hufflepuff. Sure his dad would in all likelihood have disinherited him the next morning and his Quidditch team would have been a dead weight to trail around, but in the Badger’s Lair you didn’t have to wonder if each of your actions was going to lead to a century-long feud settled in blood and death.

“I suppose you want to speak about Ardoch’s disappearance,” Marcus said. “And you want to make sure neither Warrington nor Montague are going to try something stupid.”

“Yes,” confirmed Adrian. “In fact the later point is more important than the former, in my opinion. There’s not much we can do about the so-noble and invincible Heir of House Ardoch going missing, obviously.”

The words and the expression used by Adrian could have dried the Black Lake in seconds, his Captain reflected.

“So yes, I’m more concerned with Warrington and Montague trying to ‘avenge’ him or letting us know they want to continue ‘carrying the banner of the pure-blood cause’. It could be...bad.”

“You agree, Annabeth?”

“Yes, I do,” replied the fourth-year girl. “Remember last year when several sixth-years debated if Potter would have the guts to remove any of us if she wasn’t given the excuse of self-defence? I think we have been handed the answer to this question and for one I am a bit fearful of what could happen should any Slytherin continue down the Death Eater path.”

And she had excellent reasons for that, Marcus admitted. Of the three people in the common room right now, Annabeth Blackford was the only one to have participated in the disaster most students had taken to call ‘Battle of the Chamber of Secrets’ or ‘Fall of Slytherin’s Heir’. She had seen two other Slytherins die...and had the good sense to run away before she received the same punishment.

“You realise my influence over Warrington and Montague is limited, right?” he asked rhetorically. “Both can’t play for the Quidditch team anymore, and even if they could somehow, I’m leaving Hogwarts next June. And I’ve never hidden from them I thought this entire idea of unleashing a Basilisk was completely stupid.”

Setting aside the fact that someone sooner or later would have killed the monsters – Alexandra Potter had proven it was possible and there were still guilds of Monster-Hunters overseas specialised in hunting extremely dangerous creatures – being involved in the murder of students and Professors would have made sure the Ministry would have come directly for them. At some point, there were some crimes that no amount of bribes and no powerful connections were able to erase. If they had succeeded in killing dozens of students, Ardoch, Carrow and their friends would have received the Dementor’s Kiss before the week was over. There had to be limits to Dumbledore’s benevolence and willingness to close his eyes, in the end.

“But you have some influence. If you can delay whatever projects they have in their mind until the end of this school year...”

“Then what?” And Marcus wanted seriously to know the answer. “After Potter massacred the Heir and his accomplices, I think you need to be an idiot to speak of supporting the Dark Lord’s cause in public. Now Ardoch has disappeared and no one appears to have a clue how she managed this. If Warrington and Montague are convinced they can continue their leader’s little games and avoid his fate, then there are stupider than I thought. And nothing I can say will save them in the end. Four months or fourteen months, it will change nothing. Ultimately, Potter will kill them. The only thing which will change is how easily she will slaughter them.”

In the last week Flint had wondered exactly how powerful the daughter of the former Azkaban inmate James Potter had become and how much progression she had still to make before reaching her full potential. The possible answers did not please him. At thirteen, the green-eyes Ravenclaw was at least a Gamma-level witch...and she had fought two Basilisks and several older students well before celebrating her thirteenth birthday. How dangerous she would be at fourteen once she had assimilated the third-year curriculum plus some Runes and Arithmancy, Marcus was not prepared to speculate, but he had a feeling it was not going to be a small increase in lethality.

“Yeah, but next year there’s the European Magical Tournament.” Adrian announced.

Marcus Flint narrowed his eyes.

“Surely you aren’t suggesting...”

“Oh come on, Marcus! Our House’s best students aren’t going to risk their skin participating in a deadly Tournament, you know.” The Slytherin Chaser counted on his fingers the different points. “First, our House whether we admit or not is anything but a symbol of academic excellence. It’s the result of Snape coddling us and our tendency to blame the Lions and Dumbledore for everything that goes wrong. Secondly, we are by nature a precautious lot and I think at least a third of our House is more likely to push for one of the secondary contests than the big trials. We love to carefully hedge our bets. Third, we have one of the greatest percentages of Heirs and Heiresses and most of our older years have Wizengamot relations so the gold rewards aren’t that attractive in the first place. Fourth, many of the policies popular in our Common Room are based on a certain isolationism.

So yes, I am exactly suggesting what you think. Let Warrington, Montague and whatever fools still follow them put forwards their name for the Tournament. That way we will know who stands for the cause of the Junior Death Eaters and the better part of next year will be an opportunity to rebuild House Slytherin to far more intelligent standards.”

Marcus thought about this for a moment...and concluded this was not a bad strategy at all. There was just a little clarification he wanted to receive.

“You realise, of course, Alexandra Potter is most likely going to be the Ravenclaw Champion, right? The House of the Wise had not that many powerful older students willing to risk their lives...”

The smile he received in return was innocent...as far as such an expression belonged on a Slytherin’s visage.

“Heads, Montague and Warrington lose...tails, we win.”

**10 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Fred had thought there would be retaliation for the water balloons they had bombarded the Ravenclaw table by mistake a few hours ago. He had not imagined it would come so fast.

“Depulso!”

George had been the first on the doorstep and as such, his twin was the one who received the massive pillow in the head.

“A hundred points for Alexandra!”

“Oh, come on your Dark Majesty!” Fred exclaimed. “It is a way to treat your fabulous and priceless minions, NO, NO!”

“Depulso! Depulso! DEPULSO!”

A wave of white soft pillows struck them like an avalanche and soon they were buried under it. It took several minutes for the occasional shoots to stop and the Weasley Twins at last were able to extricate themselves from the sizeable pile of seemingly inoffensive projectiles.

“Thank you, gentlemen, for your voluntary participation in our mastery experiments of the Banishment Charm,” Morag MacDougal could be incredibly irritating when she began to clap her hands like that.

But as Alexandra Potter was still levitating three pillows above her head while singing an old music tune, Fred and George decided to not comment on the subject. Receiving a new bombardment of pillows was not exactly what they had signed for this afternoon.

“Accio Pillow!” One of the white projectiles rose in the air and joined the three others the Ravenclaw was making circle at increasing speed.

“You know, the Summoning and Banishing Charms are not expected by the teachers before fourth year,” George declared. “And even then, Flitwick practically gives a month to his students to use correctly.”

“These two Charms are my third-year project. And it looks like I will have it over before month’s end, by the way.” Their investor made a vertical line with her wand and the four pillows landed gracefully on one seat each.

“Congratulations, I suppose...” Alexandra Potter didn’t look that satisfied, though.

“After spending hours and hours on Arithmantic equations and trying Runes evocations, I was hoping for something a bit more challenging.” The third-year girl passed a hand in her long black hairs. “The Summoning Charm has a very simple wand movement, the incantation is nearly impossible to mispronounce and as long as you stay in the same room, the effort is not that great. The real sticker is the will you need to exert in order to summon the object, but once you have done it once or twice, it is not that difficult.”

Fred and George looked at each other and in a silent accord decided to not point out that the ‘not that difficult’ spell had taken them the better part of three weeks to cast it to Flitwick’s satisfaction and they had not tried it in third-year. And they had been far from the last students to succeed in this class.

Sometimes, it was easy to forget the Exiled Queen was just a monster and not only in terms of power.

“But I suppose you didn’t come just to apologise on this lovely afternoon for your failed prank,” Alexandra said as she and Morag began tidying up the room and removing the pillows. “Why don’t you tell me what sort of disaster we have to deal with today?”

“What makes you think we have a problem?” Fred instantly had brilliant green eyes staring at him and amended his previous words. “Okay, I will admit the...recent events having upset the school are not exactly an advertisement for a peaceful future.”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” Morag snickered as her black-haired friend sighed in despair.

“It’s not about Ginny this time?”

“No, her situation is the same it was two weeks ago.” Well, their little sister had also started to have bad dreams a few days ago, but no need to worry everyone right now. Since the disastrous outcome of the Ravenclaw-Quidditch game, there had been enough rumours for them to know their benefactor had a lot on her plate. “No, the issue we wanted to talk is not a problem...yet.”

“I hate these words,” complained the third-year Ravenclaw. “Especially the ‘yet’. Okay pranksters, you have my attention. What is the issue which is ready to collapse on our heads in the not-so-far future? The short version, please.”

“The wards of Hogwarts are weakening and we think killing the Basilisks weakened them further.”

“WHAT?”

The outburst had come from Morag MacDougal and it had been...sonorous.

“Tell me you two are joking. Please, please tell me you are joking.”

“We are not joking,” affirmed Fred in an offended tone. Their duo might say a lot of jokes, but they knew better than to joke about that.

“I think we are going to need the longer version, George,” Alexandra’s visage had returned to a stony expression.

“Fine. Thanks to an interesting series of objects, we managed to find a new secret passage on the third floor of the northern wing. It’s close to the big griffin statue. You know the one which...”

“Yes, yes we know about that statue,” Morag chuckled.

“The passage does lead directly upstairs so it’s not like it’s useful for us except to escape Filch,” Fred added, “but we found a small cache of books on ward-analysis spells. By themselves, they aren’t worth much, but we have currently in our possession an artefact of the Marauders tied to the Hogwarts wards and this gives us a sort of magical ladder’s power-scale for the last year or so. The day you killed the Basilisks, Hogwarts lost nearly a fiftieth of its wards’ strength.”

“That’s completely ridiculous,” Morag MacDougal said. “Hogwarts wards are powered by the two Ley Lines under its foundations. Everyone knows that.”

“Everyone knows that...but you don’t believe that,” declared carefully Alexandra. “Don’t you?”

“We have our doubts,” Fred George affirmed together then Fred continued his presentation alone. “Britain has a lot of Ley Lines, and a lot of ancient Manors are built exactly to exploit them. But a nexus of two Ley Lines like the one of Hogwarts, while rarer than most, is not unique. London and the Ministry are famous to be built on four Ley Lines and Stonehenge of course has a full seven under its ruins. So by all accounts, the Ministry wards and those of certain Manors like those of the Malfoys should be more powerful than Hogwarts.”

“The Malfoys had never wizards like the Founders to erect their wards,” Morag reminded them.

“We agree, but even considering superior talent, greater expertise and a bigger ward stone...it doesn’t make any sense for the wards to be that powerful. Nowhere else can hundreds of House Elves serve, thousands of paintings be animated and stairs move like they are alive. Not unless they were cheating.”

Alexandra lips changed in a predatory smile.

“One might argue that if you are not cheating, you are not trying hard enough...still I take your point.”

Morag turned her head brusquely towards her friend. “You think they have a point?”

“I was horrified by the knowledge Salazar Slytherin had hidden not one but two Basilisks under Hogwarts,” admitted freely the green-eyed witch. “I mean the man may have been insane at the end of his life, but these are Basilisks we are speaking about! The killing machines of the Wizarding World! Why the hell on earth would the man try to hide these XXXXX-class beasts under a school of children?”

Alexandra shook her head vigorously.

“If he wanted Hogwarts to be defended adequately during his life, he would never have used Basilisks. A Parselmouth may, I say may, be able to control one without killing his allies, but no way would he be able to control two at the same time. So yes, Morag, I’m afraid tying the life-essence of the Basilisks to Hogwarts’ wards is not an absurd proposition at all. It may even explain why by an extra-ordinary series of coincidences, no one died under the fangs of the Basilisks.”

“When you tell it like that...it makes sense,” the Twins noticed how the Irish Heiress looked pained to admit this.

“Yes...and no.” The three words were barely audible and Fred doubted their benefactor had whispered them consciously. “Surely Salazar Slytherin would be intelligent to know keeping the Basilisks under this castle for the last millennium was going to end in disaster. A Basilisk is not something you can use to do anything but killing. So either he intended to use it and he was a mass-murderer, or he wanted them as a kind of super-powered battery, but then why is Hogwarts not lacking power?”

“Wow, wow, slow down...” Morag said with wide eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean we all went with the propaganda Dumbledore and his predecessors fed us,” said in an icy tone Alexandra Potter. “None of our books know clearly what happened over a thousand years ago when the Founders created this castle. According to the legends, they founded here the first renowned school of witchcraft and wizardry. But suppose that this wasn’t their intention in the first place? What if they wanted to imprison the Basilisks because they had no method to dispose of them safely?”

Fred shivered and he knew his twin had done the same thing at the same second.

“It’s...possible but improbable,” he pointed out. “According to the legends, Gryffindor had an exceptional sword able to slay nearly every living creature. He could have killed the monsters of Slytherin.”

“Yes, but the sword is just a legend, now...” commented the red-haired Ravenclaw. “There were historical confirmations of its existence, but it has been centuries since no one saw it.”

“You realise this is just a lot of suppositions.”

Alexandra smiled to them, and it was a sad smile.

“In the end, the truth is that we know very little about Hogwarts. We have so many questions and so little answers. Why did they choose to call it by such a ridiculous name? Were the Founders drunk that day? Why did they choose this place? A thousand years ago, Scotland was nearly empty of everything. The modern magical greenhouses didn’t exist so they would have needed to rely on House Elves, Professors and students’ agriculture efforts to feed themselves.”

A loud Wingardium Leviosa was cast and four cups were levitated on the table, before Alexandra began pouring orange juice in them.

“And that leaves the biggest problem. If the Basilisks and the Ley Lines represent a small fraction of the power coursing through the castle wards, then in the name of the White Tower, what sort of artefact or creature gives the rest of the power? And why by Sauron has it decided to lower its magical contribution in the last years?”

“We don’t know...”

The Basilisk-Slayer raised her cup in mock salute.

“Neither do I. But I suspect I won’t like the answer.”

**10 October 1993, Gringotts, London**

“I think I am beginning to be seriously disgusted by these humans.” Special Accountant Longfang belched loudly after finishing his last piece of meat. “No, let me change my words. I am beginning to seriously hate the humans I am forced to talk with these days.”

“Halberd and blood, I think the feelings are mutual, Longfang,” replied Grimjaw.

The younger goblin sent him a glare before stabbing the table where they were eating with one of the short blades he was always carrying on him.

“I don’t understand wizards, Senior Accountant. I simply don’t understand how their absurd society works. They have powerful warriors in their ranks, but they let the stupid and the incapable rise to the heights of leadership. If any goblin in our bank was like the moron Cornelius Fudge, he would have gotten an axe in his skull before becoming one of my sub-clerks! And if he somehow managed to be promoted to accountant, he would not last one week before someone ripped his throat.”

Grimjaw decided to clear his throat loudly before the rant was impossible to stop.

“The Ministry has refused to let us seize the assets of Lord Ardoch in repayment of his son’s debts, then.”

“Yes!” shouted Longfang. “First, they declare it is our duty to find the missing criminal, like we were hounds for their government! And then, once it is clear his crimes against Gringotts can’t be hidden, they declare whatever Dermot Ardoch did, it was his fault and his alone! They ignore over a dozen treaties with our bank and they even grant exemption for their own laws! A human House must pay for the debts of its members; it’s in their own founding laws!”

Grimjaw finished his drink before answering.

“I am not exactly fond of the human Ministry and its latest decisions, Longfang. Their deeds and their prejudiced rulings have made sure my client can’t invest in Britain without risking losing her gold.”

He had rejoiced at the fact that Stella Zabini had managed to extort the oath-breaker Warlock over four million Galleons, but the harsh truth was, these sums wouldn’t be invested in the British Isles as long as the Ministry was blocking the Potter Family Vault and gave the Heiress excellent reasons why they shouldn’t be trusted.

“Foreign investment never recovered from the war, and the latest months have not been good for the economy. Humans from the other side of the Channel are seeing the proposals of London as erratic and unreliable. They also never liked the presence of Dementors guarding a human prison...”

“I don’t blame them,” grunted Longfang.

“Neither do I, Longfang, neither do I.”

“It is not the end of the world,” said at last the younger goblin. “In two days, we are going to show our displeasure by decapitating the Head of the Goblin Liaison Office and increasing the interest rates of our loans by two percent. Maybe this message will convince Fudge and those paying him we are serious. And we will no longer have to endure the disgusting presence of Cuthbert Mockridge, which is a boon in itself.”

Grimjaw grunted in agreement. Personally, he was thinking the increase of the interest rates was more likely to attract the attention of the Ministry, with the Quidditch Cup incoming and the Ministry unable and unwilling to decide on a proper budget without half of it disappearing in the pockets of certain Heads of Department.

“And if it doesn’t attract their attention?”

“In this case, Senior Accountant, we will see how they like functioning without a Goblin Liaison Office and their bank forms multiplied by three...again.”

**16 October 1993, somewhere in Transylvania**

Many, many times, Peter Pettigrew had felt cheated the moment he began to list the advantages and the drawbacks his rat form was granting him. The pseudo-Merlinian method the Marauders had used to gain the ability to transform themselves had not improved his sight. Of his other senses, there are had been a small boost of his sense of smell and taste, but nothing truly exceptional.

No, a rat form was not a big deal. What it offered in sneakiness and subtlety, you lacked it in offensive spirit and natural weapons. The claws he could shape his hands into were not that sharp. The danger he represented partially transformed could be described as ‘very low’. Rats had no regeneration powers or any symbiotic connection with nature like stags did. But more important, his animal form had perturbed his feeding habits and in an irritating manner had refused him what it had granted the other Marauders.

Peter could and would get fat if he ate too much. Seriously, how unfair was that?

More than a decade later, he had made his peace with the fact his Animagus problem often caused him more problems than it solved. One part of him was remarking he had not much of a choice. He didn’t know if he had screwed some parts of the Animagus transformation or if it had gone horrifyingly right, but the cards had been delivered and he was forced to play them.

If he was honest with himself, he had played them well and if like today he had to do one or two long hiking trips per month to avoid looking like a fat rodent, then it was a price he was willing to pay.

And besides, it was an opportunity to do this Transylvania excursion a second time after his teenage years! Of course, winter was not far and the climate was rather cold, but he was not an Animagus bear and thus didn’t feel the pressing need to hibernate. The sky was grey and the mountain trees had lost their leaves, but the landscape had kept an austere beauty he was enjoying a lot these days. No wizards ignorant of fashion Apparating ten feet away from you and beginning to annoy you with the results of the latest Quidditch game. No blood-sucking vampire or irritable skinchanger in a radius of five kilometres. No ICW-sworn official willing to hunt an illegal Animagus to the horizon. There was just pure, undiluted fresh air, small villages, the nature and the animals of the region.

And for these sportive activities, it was exactly what he had wanted. On top of the Transylvanian mountain he had not managed to utter the complicated name, the former Hogwarts student contemplated the valleys below. Many things were hidden by the grey clouds, but there was enough to watch as he slightly recovered from the efforts of his four hours-long hiking climb.

For several minutes – though it felt like a lot longer – he stood there before finally rolling his shoulders, unpacking a few satchels of dried food and satisfying his hunger. Then it was the long descent towards the valley, and in some ways it was far more dangerous than the ascension. It had rained last week and in several passages the mud made everything unstable. It did not help his old hiking shoes were not exactly in prime condition. He would have to change them soon.

He was still a good twenty minutes of walk away from the village he had planned to stay the night to when the magical world he had thought dozens of miles away resurfaced once more. From the woods on his right, a thin stag emerged cautiously. At first sight, the animal looked like it had been ill a lot in the last years.

Peter sighed before exhaling loudly.

“This little game stopped being funny a long time ago, you know.” Not looking at the stag, he went to sit on a large white-black stone and seized his metallic jug before swallowing for several seconds the cold water he kept in his bag.

When he turned his head again, Peter was looking at the hirsute face of James Potter.

And yes, when he was saying ‘hirsute’, he was employing the correct adjective. If the girls who had been ready to spread her legs for the Quidditch Captain of Gryffindor saw him in that moment, the level of screams would have been impressively high-pitched.

“Peter.”

“James. Is there any reason you want to disturb my pleasant travel across mountains, forests and valleys? And please don’t come too close, you are stinking like a dead skunk.”

There was no need to be an Animagus rat or frankly an Animagus at all to smell the former prisoner of Azkaban had not bathed frequently during this month. And by the haunted look in his eyes and his starved appearance, James Potter had absolutely not recovered from his twelve years at Azkaban, mentally or physically.

“I have...reasons to think my daughter is a Champion of the Dark.”

Oh, this was going to be one of these conversations, wasn’t it? Peter chuckled before grabbing the small salami he was keeping for ‘emergencies’. It was going to cost him in energy, but he had a feeling he was going to need a belly before the end of this talk.

“Hmm...probably,” the rat Animagus said as he savoured a bite of his favourite food. “There have been a lot of rumours, lately in certain circles. Death, I think...aspects, certainly the Morrigan if she was chosen by the Celtic deities...”

“And you have done nothing to dissuade her?”

Peter stopped calmly eating before watching.

“Alexandra Potter is an independent girl and by no means a baby, James. I am not her father, her godfather or one of her friends. I fail to see what gives me the right to intervene in her life. I saved her life once at Hogwarts in repayment of the time Lily saved my rat’s skin, but it stops there.”

The boy who had once hesitated between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor drank more water.

“We have to make choices in our life, and by all accounts, your daughter has decided it was better to slaughter the opposition. Frankly, I can’t say her priorities are wrong...”

“Even if your soul is damned for all eternity? The Dark is tainting your soul for every curse you cast and the Old Ways were discontinued for a reason!”

Peter raised his jug and his salami in a fake movement of celebration.

“I don’t know where you have spent the last couple of months, oh Prongs, but I think you should find a Mind-Healer right now.” And to be honest, it was like the best advice he could give to the man he had once called his friend. It was clear the good parts of him had not survived his hellish imprisonment. “James, by the way you’re talking, you haven’t even tried to contact your daughter and tried to know her. Given that you were in prison for the next best thing of her entire life, you are a total stranger for her. You don’t know her. If you appear babbling nonsense and try to threaten her, at best you are going to receive a fist in your nose, at worse she is going to stun you and deliver you to the Dementors. She is far more Lily’s child than yours by now.”

The fallen Lord of House Potter mumbled something unintelligible between his teeth and Peter thought, that maybe, he should have cast a Compulsion during the break-out. That way, he would have at least the opportunity to give James to a Healer of his knowledge. The man’s services weren’t free, but James’ daughter could have paid the bill for him.

“And honestly, the Dark is not a synonym with Evil. It has its bad points, but it is not necessarily a force of atrocity and demonic corruption. It is a powerful force akin to elemental storms, but not everything it does is bad. A good thing I suppose, because otherwise we would all be doomed as Death is one of the Dark Powers...”

“The Light is the force to follow!”

“Is it?” demanded dubitatively Peter Pettigrew. “You will have to excuse me, James. I still see the corpses of the Prewett Twins rotting in their graves and the disfigured face of Mad Eye Moody in my nightmares. I fought against the Death Eaters, because they were crazy psychopaths and inbred murderers. I can’t say I regret this. It was the right thing to do. But what good did the Light in the conflict to help our cause? The only ‘Light creature’ I ever saw was Dumbledore’s phoenix Fawkes, and he was present at Hogwarts in our first year...”

An awful idea came to his mind. It was a horrible idea and for a second he thought it was ridiculous...and then he remembered the man facing him was most likely completely mad.

“James...don’t tell me you went to meet one of the members of the Army of Light...”

“And what if I did?”

Well, his estimates had been off. Lily had indeed multiplied the intelligence of the Potter family by four or five when she had married the Marauder.

“I would argue that since they probably arranged the murder of your wife with Dumbledore, you would not give them a chance to murder your daughter too. But you know, I’m a poor rat Animagus, and I probably hear things which aren’t there.”

Judging by the livid face of James, whatever he had babbled them wasn’t going to make a lot of good. Not that there was a lot of good to be expected where those fanatics were concerned. These wizards and witches were the advertisement of ‘Light is not Good’, if there ever was one.

“The Shadow Blades and the wererats killed Lily! They told me so!”

“Funny thing...I heard a different song from the rasping burned mouth of a vampire a month ago in a Transylvanian redoubt. How suddenly a group of vampires and wererats found themselves under the thrall of a massive Light-ward compelling them to kill everything in a certain area of a tiny insignificant village of Godric’s Hollow. How this assault group died in mere seconds against the power of a crimson-haired Enchantress. And how, realising their attack had failed, the killers of the Light decided to gather a furious ‘enraged crowd’ and enter the melee. Then they and their ‘victim’ perished in the inferno of Light and Dark Magic which razed the entire battlefield.”

Peter finished his speech while pushing his empty jug in his hiking bag.

“Now, I know I am only a poor rat Animagus, but this version of events look far more plausible to me. After all, it’s surely a coincidence that the next day, that Dumbledore knew somehow where and when to arrest Lord Victor of the Shadow Blades and Bellatrix Lestrange, two of the greatest Dark leaders after the fall of You-Know-Who...who by all accounts looked like they had been considerably weakened by something like a battle...a battle they have absolutely no souvenir of.”

“Lily would never have consorted with a murderess like Bellatrix Lestrange or the damned bloodsuckers!”

Bellatrix, no. The vampires, yes. Peter wondered how long the marriage between James and Lily would have lasted if the war had ended and they had been allowed to survive. The two of them had quite clearly been in love at the beginning, but the birth of Alexandra and the months after, far from uniting their couple, seemed instead to have weakened it. Was it the prophecy Dumbledore had revealed to the Order? Or had it been another issue he wasn’t aware of? One thing was sure, James hadn’t been to her side that fateful night and wasn’t in the know for a lot of things. Something he was quite likely going to pay a heavy price for in the not-so-distant future.

Peter sighed.

“James, whatever ridiculous ideas you have in your head, I suggest to you in the name of our old friendship to stop, see a Mind-Healer and try to mend the bridges with your daughter before it’s too late. Whatever happened in the past is the past. The Light and the Dark have fought for centuries and will likely massacre each other for the best part of the next millennium. Save your House...”

“I can’t, Peter. There’s a prophecy at stake.”

For the first time in their conversation, Peter didn’t feel amusement, pity or exasperation. No, for the first time he felt anger.

“Prophecies!” The last of the Pettigrew line roared like lion. “Have you learned nothing of the previous one? The Order tried to play it, and what good it did for us? Frank and Alice, dead! Their son Neville praised by an entire population for a thing he likely isn’t responsible for! The Order of Phoenix’s best elements, all lying in cold, swallow graves! You in prison, you wife dead and most people were convinced your daughter had shared her fate!

Have you tried to open a Divination book since your third year? Prophecies always come true but never like you have imagined! These omens of Fate only bring death, destruction and suffering! And you want to play with another when we all pay in nightmares and blood for the previous one?”

For a second or two, Peter thought he had managed to give a good mental kick to Prongs...and then there was a small ‘pop’ and the vagabond-looking James Potter was nowhere to be seen.

“And not even a ‘sorry for ruining your hiking excursion, Peter’. James you are far from the good friend I remember...”

The bag found its place back on his shoulders and the walk resumed, but most of his good mood had evaporated, and it didn’t come back as he progressed upon an old stone bridge.

It took several minutes before he was calmed enough to remember the denial of the other Marauder.

“And by the way James?” he chuckled to himself. “Your wife was always more tolerant than you of the other existing magical species...the Enchantress who took her as an Apprentice after Hogwarts was a Succubus...funny thing, isn’t it?”

**24 October 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Sometimes, I think being rich brings more trouble than advantages.” Alexandra said as she finished completing an official roll of parchment and handed it to Atalanta. Morag opened the window, and the white owl flew out of their dorm into the night.

“No, you think?” replied Hermione showing a ‘I told you so’ expression on her visage and sending a glance to the pile of parchments waiting patiently next to her bed.

“Yes, yes. Angering our wise and benevolent Headmaster because he absolutely can’t be trusted to stay true to his vows...well, if I was presented with a method to go back in time, I would do the same thing. I didn’t react like I did after the Quidditch match to steal his money...I did it because the man is a damned liar and he stole my family’s Invisibility Cloak for near twelve years!”

In fact, when Lady Zabini had explained to her the vows a member of the Wizengamot was forced to swear before taking office, Alexandra had been aghast. As the Chief Warlock, the Vow was more stringent, not less, and Albus Dumbledore should have been punished heavily by his own magic no matter the sort of mental gymnastic he was making in his head. That he hadn’t bled out on the floor of the Great Hall the moment people began to call him on this, the old wizard had either a formidable capacity to convince himself of the legality of his actions or he was protected by someone higher in the food chain. Or both.

Despite this, the Exiled had believed it was only a question of time before the man was removed from all his positions and forced to leave Hogwarts in disgrace. After the official second trial of Bellatrix Black-Lestrange published by the ICW and the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch game, the influence of the Defeater of Grindelwald had to be at an all-time low.

Yes, Lady Zabini was not going to depose a suspensive motion in front of a Wizengamot but surely dozens of Dark and Grey Houses were going to move in for the kill!

Only they hadn’t. Oh, House Malfoy and a few others had proposed a motion of defiance towards the man, but a good half of the Wizengamot had voted against it. Most of the Light had supported their leader, no matter what crimes the ‘great man’ had done. If the rumours Morag’s father were true, a lot of gold and shady dealings had been done, but Dumbledore’s political life had survived once more.

And after that, the Ministry letters had started to arrive. It appeared a non-insignificant part of the useless Ministry bureaucracy had genuinely thought she was going to store all the gold she had ‘acquired’ from Dumbledore in a vault she couldn’t access at the moment.

Seriously, how stupid were these people?

And sadly, what Hermione had called their ‘tunnel vision’ made them useful puppets for Dumbledore and his allies. It had not taken them long to send the paperwork in a vain attempt to screw her, and sadly the existence of Lady Zabini’s army of lawyers was ultimately very justified.

This was not the end of the manipulations coming from the Hogwarts Headmaster. Less than a week after the Quidditch game, the rumours had begun to spread. The whole affair of the poisonings in the Common Room was evidently a conspiracy to humiliate Gryffindor and discredit Albus Dumbledore. No, of course, the paragons of justice and virtue called Leo Black and Ron Weasley would never have dared intruding in another Common Room. Why, the very idea was ridiculous!

Things had gone very ugly in a very fast manner. Whoever was directing the rumours – and the Exiled had a very good idea who was behind them – was not that much concerned with facts and more interested in preserving the reputation of the Light. This had not made the atmosphere more pleasant in the corridors and the classrooms. A good third of Ravenclaw, the near-totality of Slytherin and about a quarter of Hufflepuff had rejected these talks as the lies they were. Something like a good three-fifths of Ravenclaw and half of Hufflepuff were trying very hard to remain non-involved in the disputes and the incidents which multiplied at an alarming rate.

And unfortunately, with a few exceptions like Fred, George and their little sister, the near-totality of Gryffindor, a quarter of Hufflepuff and a minority of Ravenclaw had jumped at first sight for the first explication, any explication, telling them their atrocious behaviour and outrageous rule-breaking wasn’t the cause of their problems.

The biggest and loudest figure leading these bigoted teenagers was, surprisingly, not Neville Longbottom. Perhaps the Boy-Who-Lived had at last understood the very necessity of walking on eggs since he could very well have joined his two associates in their months-long suspension. Anyway, Neville was discreet and apparently unwilling to lead the Lion’s pride, so it was Cormac McLaggen who had risen to the top and was directing the insults and provocations towards the Slytherins and the Ravenclaws. He was helped in this endeavour by Zacharias Smith of Hufflepuff and Marietta Edgecombe of Ravenclaw, who by a strangest coincidence had also happened to be two of her biggest critics outside Gryffindor Tower.

The Chief Warlock was not bothering with a facade of neutrality anymore. The *Loud Duck* was continuing its publications, but as an illegal newspaper. Parchments had materialised on every common room announcing the first-and-only school newspaper was propagating malicious rumours and thus was banned from Hogwarts grounds. Few had failed to notice only McGonagall and Snape had dared adding their signatures next to the one of the Headmaster on these documents.

“By the way, have you thought what you’re really going to do with all this gold?” asked Hermione. “I mean, besides building a new manor for the time you will graduate and not live with your guardian anymore.”

“Investment in several promising companies, certainly,” the green-eyed Ravenclaw said thoughtfully, “Lady Zabini said last summer we would discuss it during the next winter holidays, though I doubt in August she had any clue I was going to be handed the...kind of opportunities this month gave.”

“Yes, but I was asking for another reason,” the bushy-haired Gryffindor-turned-Ravenclaw said. “Remember the proposal Chang made you shortly before this disaster of a Quidditch game?”

Alexandra blinked for some seconds and finally realised that with so much to do, she had almost forgotten the issue. Thanks whatever deities listening that Hermione had a far better memory than her.

“I had almost forgotten,” admitted the Potter Heiress. “Between the school projects, homework and all the problems created by the end of the Quidditch match, it was not something I lost a lot of hours thinking upon.”

First there had been the matter of sending Ardoch for a one-way trip to the Galapagos. Then it had been incidents and avoiding hexes in the corridors, dealing with the paperwork and the renewed hostility of many students. Plus if she wanted to be honest, she wanted to avoid thinking about the consequences of another Life-Debt.

“If I remember correctly, you were probably the strongest opponent against the idea, Hermione.”

Lyre, in good Slytherin, had thought it was an excellent idea. Luna had whispered something about wrackspurts or nargles. Morag had been mostly neutral on the whole deal. But Nigel and Hermione had been at the forefront of the opposition.

“Well, you have to admit Chang left us an impression for the first two years and it was not a good one.”

The two other girls in the dorm snorted at the same moment.

“Yes, she was a bitch,” acknowledged Morag with a chuckle. The Irish Heiress decided to accompany this blunt declaration with a little dance on her bed. “She’s been a bit better since Alexandra rid of Hogwarts of the Basilisks. And she’s been nearly pleasant since you saved her ass after the Dementors made her fall from her broom. I assume this changed your point of view, Hermione?”

“No, not really,” Hermione immediately contradicted her. “I realise that she has good reasons to not like Muggle-born students unlike Malfoy and Nott, but I think she just tries to be nice because of the potential Life-Debt Alexandra has hanging over her head.”

“Thanks for the advice. Though I sense a ‘but’ coming.” Alexandra said after a couple seconds of reflexion.

“But Chang has a point. Dumbledore is an Alchemist. He is certainly not the equal of Flamel, otherwise he would have a dozen of Philosopher’s Stones and he certainly wouldn’t have been worried at the idea of losing four million Galleons. No matter what new crimes and misdemeanours we will find in the next years, he can always recover from disasters which would send us directly to Azkaban. He and the Alchemists he has for allies can pretty much decide the prices for Alchemical components between themselves. And assuming someone is successful in getting him removed from all his positions of power, all it will do is give him more time to spend on Alchemy studies and rebuild his cash reserves until the next crisis.

I am not saying I like this. But the only alternative I can think of is for an Alchemist to take one of us as Apprentice.”

“Good luck doing that,” said Morag while trying a Summoning Charm on one of her books. The book jumped in the air but stopped its progression half-way and fell to the ground loudly.

“Needs a bit more work,” Alexandra told her friend before returning to the conversation at hand. “Alchemy Apprenticeships must be the second hardest thing to get for a career behind Wand-Makers, right?”

“I hadn’t thought to make the comparison, but that sounds right.” Morag grimaced. “Being an Apprentice is a very serious affair, you know. There are always Vows involved. It can last from five to twenty years. Your Master is putting his reputation on the line by presenting you to his Guild as his or her Apprentice. He teaches you, he is your mentor, your Professor and your guide in good society. I mean there’s a reason why there are schools like Hogwarts, Durmstrang or Beauxbatons around. The famous names generally don’t bother answering your introduction letters until you’re seventeen and your academic grades have pulverised the records. And of course, it’s just for ‘normal’ Apprenticeships where there are plenty of Masters available. Alchemy would be considerably harder.”

“Figures,” Alexandra replied before using her wand to summon a book. “If Chang has an extensive amount of good books on the subject, what are the odds she can become a full-fledged Alchemist without needing an Apprenticeship?”

“Oh, about zero I think.” Morag threw her an annoyed look at the facility she had mastered the Accio incantation. “I am not in Chang’s head, but there’s a reason Alchemy is considered one of the most difficult magical disciplines around.”

The smile of the blue-eyed Ravenclaw was particularly evil.

“After all, those who aren’t good enough are generally found days later in several parts.”

“Okay, I suppose this is logical.”

There was a reason several chapters of the big history books in the library were dedicated to the ‘exploits’ of the pre-modern Alchemists. Before Flamel, the successes in this field had been very much lone exceptions. The rule had been explosive failures. At some point in the nineteenth century, Prague had been ground zero for the majority of the Alchemic incidents and other associated explosions.

“Suggestions?”

“There are too many unknown parts in the equation,” said carefully Hermione. “So far, everything we have heard about next year by reliable sources is that there will be a European Tournament involving our school and three others, and that it is going to take place most likely in Italian or Venetian territory. We don’t know the methods of selection for the Hogwarts Champions. We don’t know for sure how many Champions will be selected or the criteria for these selections. And with how...popular you are where our Headmaster is concerned, it’s entirely possible there will be no Ravenclaw chosen for this Tournament.”

“Hermione is right,” agreed Morag with a series of vigorous nods. “Willingness to cross the Channel or not, it’s likely Dumbledore will want to put forwards his minions, excuse me, the so-noble and courageous Lions of Gryffindor Tower. Assuming the rumours are true and there are four Champions per school, I could very well see a McLaggen-Longbottom-Johnson team with Diggory as the fourth member as a consolation prize for Hufflepuff.”

Alexandra laughed for a good half a minute at this.

“Okay, I would pay to see that.”

The most optimistic scenario she had for such a team would be ‘disaster’. As long as it was a sort of physical contest, the Gryffindors and the Hufflepuff would have their chance. Maybe. The other schools weren’t going to fight fair, unlike the poor lonesome Badger.

“Your advice is to stall then,” Alexandra continued in a serious tone once they had copiously mocked the Lions.

“Pretty much. Tell Chang you are still considering the offer, but due to the lack of official confirmation on the Tournament details, you are waiting to know how the Champions are selected. I would not promise her the...four hundred thousand Galleons she asked you, on the other hand. Thirty or forty thousand Galleons should be more in line for the first experiments of a novice-Alchemist, plus a meeting with Lady Zabini and you during the summer holidays. And if it isn’t good for her, well...too bad for her. And don’t forget to settle the Life-Debt, one way or another.”

“Morag, I’m convinced you would have made a terrible Hufflepuff...”

“Thank you, my General!”

**25 October 1993, Rome, Italy**

As far as dinner rooms went, this one wasn’t so bad. The decoration was including ten ancient tapestries, two sculptures from the Renaissance era, and three large – and priceless - paintings. The golden chandeliers were of a beauty sufficient to content head of states. The tablecloth was of a whiteness prompt to seduce the most severe of butlers. Silk and precious materials were accompanying gold and crystal on the table and the buffets surrounding it.

And yet, thousands of people would have preferred pretext an urgent meeting with their dentist rather than dining in this room. First, because while the silver platters were finely chiselled and worthy of a Prince, today they were only carrying recipients of spices and sauces. There were no vegetables, no fishes, no food any restaurant would have recognised as familiar. But secondly and most importantly, there was a dead man hanging by his feet over the central section of the table.

The man had not died easily. His expressions were forever fixed in an expression of horror and his mouth had been gagged at some point. As for the cause of his death, the bloody golden knife on a nearby platter had good chances of being responsible for the large gaping wound on his throat.

The large golden chalice underneath the corpse had ensured the totality of the blood was recovered and delivered by the intermediary of golden tubes to the gold cups at the other end for each participant of this dinner.

Needless to say, none of them had been humans.

Obviously, nearly all the guests had already departed. The fact there was only one hour left before dawn may have something to do with it.

“My Queen,” she bowed largely before approaching the table.

“Knight Recruiter,” the Queen of the Exchequer replied with a short nod before swallowing whatever red liquid remained in her golden cup. “I suppose your presence tonight has something to do with the reports I demanded from you ten nights ago?”

“Yes, my Queen. The preparations for the Tournament are a bit ahead of schedule and the Greeks have been...receptive...to my arguments. I have also charmed half a dozen ICW delegates and they have pretty much signed me a blank check for the ceremonies. There is of course a small mountain of problems waiting to be dealt with, but I think we will have most of them erased before the year’s end.”

“And the Champions of the Dark Powers?”

“Four of them have been approached to diverse degrees. Two are loyal to our cause, and while the two others are not eager to join our ranks, they have no problem confirming their participation – or at least their willingness to participate in the selections organised by their school. As per your directives, I have not given the orders to our agents infiltrated at Durmstrang and Hogwarts to break cover and contact the remaining two.”

“Good. These four are...not vital, but important for the plan. If the Champions of the Dark are not gathered, it is likely those of the Light will not feel the incentive to come.”

The Queen of the Exchequer sighed theatrically before removing her long hooded robe and dispelling the illusions surrounding her, revealing a visage which was horribly disfigured on the left side by a sword blow.

There had been many of the prisoners unlucky enough to see the Queen in her full glory while she was around to watch. Hundreds had voiced their joy at seeing the evidence there were wounds the Exchequer could not heal. These dead men and women hadn’t understood.

Nothing in this world could heal the wounds caused by Excalibur.

“Now, my faithful Knight, tell me of our problematic Dark Champions. Begin with my successor,” green eyes brighter than the Killing Curse flashed in the penumbra. “I want to know about Alexandra Potter.”