**Chapter 46**

**Summer of Evasions**

“*When a prisoner of style escapes, it’s called an evasion*.” Mark Twain

**30 June 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Albus Dumbledore was completely exhausted when Fawkes brought him back to his office.

Even the Pepper-up Potion he drank and several lemon sweets were unable to ease the tiredness he experienced in every bone of his body.

He was not getting any younger, this was for sure. Two decades ago, a sleepless night would have not been of any consequence for a duel or an intense magical performance. Looking at his tired expression in a silver mirror, he knew this was no longer true.

He had hoped for five or six hours of good sleep in this night of June. The Wizengamot debates of the week had been completely out of control – the budget allocated for the Quidditch World Cup of next year had risen over the most pessimistic estimates, again. Every Lord and his grandmother wanted explanations, and Fudge was trying to divert the faults on his Department Heads when he was the main culprit.

The meetings with the Order members sent to the ICW and the preparations of the Inter-school Tournament had brought more bad news. The ICW had failed anew to elect a new Supreme Mugwump. This had to be the fifteenth vote, if he remembered correctly, and it was turning into a farce. There were too many candidates and too little pragmatism at work. On the subject of the Tournament schools, Durmstrang, Beauxbatons and the rest were not cooperative at all. So far, he had been unable to convince them this prestigious event had to be hosted at Hogwarts. It wasn’t a single point of contention: the number of challenges, the money prize for the winner, the identity of the judges, the security measures, the tutoring the Champions would receive...everything from the colour of the school flags to the authorised XXXXX-class creatures was on the table. Three years ago, the other Headmasters and Headmistresses would not have dared opposing him, but those days were unfortunately gone. Now they were quite happy to open their mouths at every proposition.

But all of this had been relegated to insignificant issues when the alarms of Nurmengard had begun their terrible scream.

Half-asleep, he had needed several seconds to recognise the atrocious noise. There had been some tests in 1945 and 1946, but the alarms had never been used since, because no one has ever managed to breach the walls of Nurmengard. And why would anyone try launching what was for all intent and purposes a suicidal attack? The overwhelming majority of the Dark Wizards and Witches imprisoned there were dead, their last breaths unnoticed by the rest of the wizards and witches of Europe.

It had taken him half a minute to transfigure his night clothes to something more battle-like, drink three elixirs he had invented increasing his speed and his reflexes, before Fawkes Apparated at the edge of Nurmengard’s outer wards.

His first thought had been that it was a nightmare. Inferi, by the tens of thousands. There were more Inferi than he had ever seen in his life, running and crawling in the darkness. It shouldn’t have been possible. Certainly, some Dark Wizards in Grindelwald’s army had been powerful necromancers. Assuredly, they had drowned several prestigious lines of wizards to extinction under endless waves of undead. But these Dark Wizards were dead. They were gone, and Gellert for all his terrifying skills was not a Necromancy expert.

But this was not a nightmare, it was real. And like the hundreds of wizards arriving on the unexpected battlefield, he had poured his most powerful fire spells into it to incinerate this horde of death.

There had been many deaths and it had taken the European coalition two hours to burn these abominations, but they had been victorious.

It was a victory that tasted like ashes. The Necromancer controlling the Inferi had escaped. The fortress of Nurmengard was destroyed.

And Gellert Grindelwald, his former lover, best friend, and nemesis, was long gone.

“This is a catastrophe,” he murmured to himself. His eyelids were heavy and he wanted more than anything to go back to his bed, but he tried to straighten himself in his large seat. “I should have...”

The Chief Warlock didn’t finish the sentence. Should he have killed the man he had loved once upon a time? In hindsight, the answer was yes. But he had always hated taking lives and Gellert Grindelwald was not someone he could look in the eyes while he ended his life. He simply could not.

It was easy to say it after the deed was done, course. For decades, he had believed Nurmengard walls were impossible to breach. There had been some purists and revolutionaries who had believed they could achieve what the ICW had failed to accomplish. Sometimes, the wardens doing their patrols found back their incinerated remnants dispersed over dozens of miles.

“Gellert Grindelwald is free.” Saying the sentence out loud did not make him feel better.

One of the most redoubtable Dark Lords in history was free and he hadn’t been able to stop it. He had not heard a single rumour that someone was preparing an operation like this.

Fortunately, the imprisoned Dark Lord had by all records been in a piteous state these last years. According to the Swedish forces which had last performed the risky inspections, Gellert had been very close to the grave and certainly in no state to duel anyone or begin a campaign of terror.

It was good, because he hadn’t the slightest idea where the man he had defeated at Berlin had fled.

Worse, he hadn’t the slightest idea who had an interest in performing such an impressive attack. There had been no mark, no claims, and no enemy to be recognised. Gellert Grindelwald had been linked with many evil organisations during his conquest of Europe, but these allies had abandoned him decades ago. Why would they suddenly decide to change the situation in 1993?

Taking his best eagle quill, the Headmaster of Hogwarts began to write a message to announce an emergency session of the Wizengamot in a few hours. This was a grave affair, and Britain had to be warned of the peril now.

“I fear Dark Times are ahead of us, Fawkes,” he said to his loyal companion. The trill of the Phoenix brought some comfort, but not enough. Nurmengard was in ruins and the world was far darker now.

**30 June 1993, MacDougal Manor, Ireland**

There were many things at which MacDougal Manor beat the Dursleys’ house without trying. The breakfasts were a good example. Before she turned eleven, Alexandra had been forced to cook for the fat walruses known as Vernon and Dudley countless times and since everything had to be ready when the obese uncle descended the stairs, it meant waking up very early.

Happily, this period was long over and the people she had been forced to call her relatives were in the place they deserved: a very normal prison for normal criminals. In the manor of her Irish friend, she could sleep late and nobody screamed at her if she didn’t want to cook: there was a House Elf who seemed to pride himself on his culinary creations and he was far better than her at it too.

In addition to this, the kitchen was enormous, easily five times the size of the Dursleys’, so there wasn’t any need to stand and wait for a chair. It was also a different atmosphere, with a lot of old wood for the furniture and paintings of fruits and vegetables on the walls. Oh, there were things which took a certain time to acknowledge – like the speed the House Elf was preparing the meals – but overall, Alexandra liked a lot these dispositions.

The small drawback, if she had to find one, was that Morag and she were often alone to take their breakfasts. Morag’s parents left the Manor very early in the morning, earlier than the hours the Ravenclaws were waking up at Hogwarts at any rate. The large kitchen and rooms were sounding a bit hollow with just them and the House Elves inside.

Apparently, this morning was not going to be an exception to the rule. Tovy – it was the name of the MacDougal House Elf in charge of the cooking – had already prepared the orange and apple juices, the marmalade and countless other edible things which had been produced in the nearby gardens, but there was no one inside when Morag pushed the door open with Alexandra on her heels.

“What is the program today?” the raven-haired witch demanded as she poured a large dose of orange juice into her glass.

“We continue the Gaelic lessons.” Alexandra groaned. “And we finish the Potions homework.” A new groan erupted from her throat.

“Honestly, what is Snape’s problem with summer holidays?” It was the Senior Professor who decided the summer assignments the Hogwarts students had to work on, and on average the essays and other research Professors like Flitwick or Sprout gave were far longer than the standard homework at school. But Professor Snape had given the equivalent of three full rolls of parchment to write on six topics, and to say it was a lot of work was somewhat underestimating the reality.

Morag’s visage frowned in concentration.

“I think the Golden Trio blew up two cauldrons during their last class in May,” she finally said after a few moments of silence.

“That explains a few things, all right.” Trust Longbottom and his friends to create chaos before leaving the castle for several months. Too bad she had not compiled the grades the Gryffindors had earned in Potions. Alexandra had a feeling the dungeon masters had not had a light hand dealing with the pranksters.

But in the end, it was all the students of second year who had to write the essays, Potions dissertations, and commentary on different ancient experiments. And it was not easy. Alexandra had been in the top five of Potions this year, but she had already gone twice to the MacDougal library searching for additional sources of information.

“I think I will have finished it by the end of the week,” the Potter Heiress affirmed. She was at two rolls of parchment when she had finished yesterday. Since it was Wednesday, it still left a few days of work before she completed the assignment.

“I’m going to take longer than that,” retorted Morag. Alexandra slowly nodded. Morag had not been too far behind her in Potions this year, but when their group had Hermione Granger to provide help, it was a non-negligible advantage. Their bushy-haired friend being away for the better part of summer, the long explanations were unavailable. Alexandra knew how and why ingredients reacted with each other like they did in a cauldron, but to her sorrow she didn’t think she would make a good teacher in this class. “But don’t worry. You won’t avoid your Gaelic lessons.”

Immaturely, the green-eyed witch stuck out her tongue.

“Irish Gaelic is not an easy language to learn,” she conceded after they ate and drank much of the good food prepared on the table. The House Elves were really masters in this domain.

“And there is no Potion for you to instantly speak it,” added Morag with a chuckle. The Ravenclaw black-haired witch scowled.

“Yes, yes, laugh and mock me.” She had made the mistake once to ask if there were Potions having this kind of power, and her friend had reminded her a lot of this less-than-glorious moment this last week.

Magic was more or less the power of the mind over the real world, right? Wizards and witches every day made the impossible possible, so why not learning languages with a twirl of the wand or a good dose of a mysterious – and expensive - Potion.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work like that.

There were Potions for a wizard or a witch to learn languages. But these recipes weren’t instant buttons for ‘I have learned this and can correct the grammar mistakes of someone in his mother tongue’. They eased the process, put you in a different state of mind for a few seconds and allowed you to absorb knowledge about the language you wanted faster than any prodigy. It was a huge advantage compared to the old-fashioned and non-magical methods, but you still needed someone to speak to you in this foreign language for hours and answer in the same tongue. Alexandra had begun ten days ago, and while she was making progress, she was far, very far, from fluency.

“You’re learning well for a beginner,” Alexandra raised both eyebrows. Morag of course had learned Gaelic since she was a toddler and had taken charge of her language lessons. In the morning, Alexandra was forced to swallow a lot of vocabulary and Gaelic texts. In the afternoons, they were visiting numerous old villages of Ireland where Farfadets and Selkies had always refused to learn English. “I think by the end of July, long conversations will not be a problem anymore and by the time you return to Hogwarts, you will be completely fluent.”

“And then you will decide next summer it’s time for me to learn another language?” Alexandra replied in a falsely outraged sneer.

“Well, of course,” the smile of Morag could be disturbingly predatory sometimes. “Irish Gaelic is unfortunately restricted to Irish communities and English is only useful as long as you stay on British soil. There are a few other English-speaking countries, but the Ministry isn’t exactly on good terms with the UMAS and the Australian Directorate, so most people don’t go there. The language in diplomatic circles and other international events is French, not English.”

“Things are different on the non-magical side of things.” Not that it was too much of a surprise. The International Statute of Secrecy had been enacted a long time ago. “I suppose then the next goal with be learning to speak French once Gaelic is done?”

“Absolutely,” confirmed Morag. “But it will probably be easier for you. You went to France and learned some words a year ago, and Potions to improve French-speaking training have been improved a lot in the last few centuries.” The red-haired girl murmured the next sentence. “Perhaps because the Noble Houses spent all their time quarrelling with Paris during the eighteenth century....”

“Binns would be so disappointed in you for these ridiculous affirmations.” She smirked in amusement and started to imitate the dead tone of the ghost. “My dear Lady, the sole and only preoccupation of the Wizengamot has always been to crush Goblin Rebellions...no wait, Goblin Rebellions and Dark Wizards...excuse me Goblin Rebellions, Dark Wizards and Giants...no wait...”

Morag burst in laughter and Alexandra followed her instants after.

For a few more minutes they continued their impersonations of the calamitous History Professors before finishing their breakfast and moving outside. Sometimes they read the newspapers Morag’s parents were buying, but none appeared to have been received this morning. Today the weather was far cloudier than usual and it looked like it was going to rain before the evening. Ireland was a very green country, but sadly that meant it rained a lot. They climbed back to the first floor and after some time in the bathroom, went to the study room next to the library.

“Once we have finished Potions, what will we have left?”

Alexandra consulted the list of homework they had done.

“Transfiguration, Charms, History, Herbology and the DADA homework are ready for grading.” In the Defence case, the ‘recommendations’ of the elder wizards having replaced Lockhart were so easy it had been anything but a challenge. “When Potions is over, we will have the star maps for Astronomy to draw. And I must read the books for Arithmancy once our Hogwarts letters get here.”

Elder Ravenclaw students had told her Professor Vector was testing her students on the very first day and since she didn’t know if this was a joke or not, Alexandra was going to study seriously for this class.

“Perhaps a few more research sessions on the Ogham Runes might be useful too once the lessons of Gaelic are done.”

“Morag, according to your parents the best part of third year in Ancient Runes is spent working on Elder Futhark.”

The blue-eyed Ravenclaw rolled her shoulders.

“It could give us an advantage over the rest of the people taking Runes.”

“If you say so,” Personally, Alexandra was not worried at all. Yes, they were more students who had chosen this elective than Arithmancy, but the four and fifth-years had spread the word Ancient Runes had a very high rate of drop-outs between September and December. Unlike the course of Professor Vector, there were many Lions, Snakes, and Badgers choosing it at the end of second year. These self-proclaimed ‘rivals’ realised fast that easier OWLS like Divination or Care of Magical Creatures were giving them better grades and did not end their chances to be selected for the Quidditch team. “But first, we have to deal with Potions or Professor Snape is going to drown us in his largest cauldron.”

“You always exaggerate.”

“Do you want to verify?”

The next two hours was a succession of hard and not very fun brainstorming. Not only did they have to find the answers, but they also had to take great care they weren’t going to be accused to copy each other. Ron Weasley had tried it once last year, and it had been...ugly. They were progressing slowly, but by the putrid smell of the Basilisk, a roll of parchment was an extremely long bit of writing...

Mentally exhausted, the two girls marched back to the kitchens when the magical clocks rang twelve o’clock. The smell was appetising, but most of her hunger disappeared when she saw the headline of the *Dancing Farfadet* an owl had just thrown on the left of the table.

**GRINDELWALD ESCAPES**

“Please tell me it’s not true...”

But the special edition of the *Daily Prophet* next to it was confirming the worst indeed had happened.

**DESTRUCTION OF NURMENGARD**

“By Merlin and Morgana, how did they do it?” Morag traits were incredibly pale and she supposed her own expression was not better.

Each newspaper’s page made the situation a bit worse just by reading the main titles, making Alexandra glad she wasn’t able to read the foreign papers which were arriving by owl-post.

**NIGHT OF TERROR: INFERI ARMY RETURNED FROM THE GRAVE**

**GREATEST DARK LORD OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY FREE**

**INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF WIZARDS CALLS FOR STATE OF EMERGENCY**

**TASK FORCE SUFFERS HUNDREDS OF CASUALTIES**

**THE NEW RISE OF THE OLD DARK LORD**

“And here I thought this summer was going to be boring...” Alexandra gritted her teeth in frustration.

“Do you want to change your stance on what we discovered at Rashtam?”

The Potter Heiress thought about the potential catastrophic scenarios a former Dark Lord getting involved with skinchangers. None were events she really wanted to explore in depth.

“Yes, we are going to inform the Ministry. An anonymous letter with a vial of the drug and a partial document of our conclusions should do the trick.” Alexandra counted to a hundred mentally before breathing loudly. “I think we are going to need a lot of contingencies for this school year...”

**5 July 1993, Exchequer Secret Base, Somewhere in China**

For the first time in the last forty years, Gellert Grindelwald didn’t feel any pain. His lungs, his bones, his teeth, and most of his body had stopped informing him he was in a lamentable state, courtesy of six blood rituals. His senses were restored, he had stopped looking like a corpse and magic was flowing again in his exhausted body.

To be sure, the man who had built Nurmengard was still looked like an old man in his late seventies, but this was a massive improvement when compared to his pre-evasion health. His hair had regained some colour and he could stand and walk on his own. It would take many more illegal Potions and outlawed rituals to give him back a measure of his former strength. But at least for the moment, Gellert Grindelwald didn’t feel so vulnerable anymore. He had a wand. He had his magic. He was no longer a prisoner in the prison of his own conception.

One might say the outcome of the last days was to his benefit...if he survived the meeting to come, of course.

Alone and unescorted he walked the corridors of the dark fortress he had been brought to after Knight Explorer breached the walls of Nurmengard and escaped with him. Some might call it overconfidence on part of the Exchequer to not guard him in permanence, but he had studied the first layer of wards around him as soon as he was able. Grindelwald had always fancied himself an excellent curse-breaker, but to dismantle the first traps and wards, he would need at least a few hours and there was without doubt more curses and evil surprises waiting to be activated just in case. Besides, he must have been injected some poisons and cursed by a Knight or two while he was unconscious. It was basic procedure. For the moment, these threats were totally passive in his body, but at the first sign of betrayal...

Dark door after dark door opened in front of him. Thousands of runes shining in different colours could be seen on the walls, and they weren’t the decorative kind. The style looked to be Sumerian at first sight. It was interesting, since according to his rescuer the base was located somewhere in Northern China.

The last doors were greater than the others, standing at approximately three metres and a half in height. They were also painted with the symbol of the Exchequer in bright gold. The silence was imposing, and as he walked the former Dark Lord could not help but shiver as a very familiar dark cloud came into view.

Even after all these years, the King of the Exchequer had not lost this dreadful aura of darkness and terror.

Today, they evidently weren’t to meet in the throne room – the exact location of which was a mystery to him. There was no throne and no grand avenue in this base. It didn’t mean the place wasn’t worth the detour. Everywhere he looked there were heirlooms, artefacts and priceless artworks. Hundreds of paintings and statues thought lost forever were in this vault of marvels. And these were just the less valuable items. Here and there, there were objects filling him with dread, for they shone with a splendour and brilliance that should not belong in this world. These were weapons and amulets of the Light Powers, unless he was badly mistaken, and given that the Exchequer was an organisation created and supported by the Dark for millennia, these must have been taken by force.

The King was at the other end of the room, standing near a table coursing with the same devastating white-gold energies. He was not alone. The Queen was next to him, a presence far less powerful yet still dwarfing Gellert’s power without trying. The azure robe of Leonardo Polo – in his attire of Knight Explorer – was closer to him, waiting between two magnificent gold standards of the Imperial Roman legions. Opposite to him was another Knight. As they were in Asia, Gellert Grindelwald had thought Knight Summoner or Knight Herald would be included in the debate but it was Knight Priest who was facing the Portuguese. This was not exactly a positive sign. Said Knight had been deployed in South America for the better part of his service, and he had rarely met him. To his knowledge, the white-robed figure was the official Master of Rituals of the Exchequer...which at least explained why the Rooks and the Bishops who did the blood rituals of the last days were such experts.

He kneeled once he was twenty metres away from the highest-ranked wizard of the Exchequer. There was no other choice if he wanted to keep his head.

“Gellert Grindelwald,” called the tenebrous voice in the old hieratic of Kemet. “You were one of my most promising students...and you became a monumental failure when you betrayed us.”

The violet-eyed wizard winced but firmly closed his mouth and mastered his thoughts behind his heaviest Occlumency shields.

“Do not think your betrayal has been forgotten.” Something burning brushed against his skin and suddenly Gellert was face against the ground, his body utterly paralysed. One, two seconds and then he had once more control of his body but he could not stand up, it was like a hundred Charms were pressing on his back. “Two days after your departure from our organisation, many of the Knights militated to inflict you an eternal torment.”

“We can still do it, your Majesty,” the voice of Knight Priest was the one of a gifted orator, of this there was no argument against. “Please let the crocodiles of the Queen eat him. I can bind his soul to a phylactery and transfer his essence from sacrifice to sacrifice. Let him experience countless deaths for the next couple of centuries as the Dark Powers torment him.”

Grindelwald’s breathing went uncontrollable, as the weight crushing him grew even more unbearable. Pain was coming back...and then it stopped.

“Tempting, but no,” The announcement was spoken in a somewhat mild tone –mild for the King of course. “Despite his lack of loyalty, the ‘Dark Lord of Nurmengard’,” the irony in these words was unmistakeable, “can be useful for our next operations.”

The weight was completely lifted and the former student of Durmstrang stood with difficulty, his breath slow and erratic, and his legs weak and worn out. The pressure from the terrifying black aura subsided somewhat, but as always the impression to be lost in a nightmare of shadows and evil remained.

“This is your last chance, ‘Master of Death’.” A magical shockwave hit him from behind and he fell on his knees for the second time this day. “A thought of rebellion, a whisper you intend to use your power for another cause, and Knight Priest’s proposition will be accepted. The crocodiles we keep are well-fed, but they always seem hungry for more.”

There was movement on his left and as Gellert turned his head slowly, he saw several objects levitated in front of the Queen. Visually, they did not look like much. The first was a diary of very common Muggle manufacture which seemed to have seen better days. The second was a ring. The third was a locket.

Magically, they were aberrations. As a Dark Lord and limitless researcher he had long cast aside morals and ethical boundaries, but these artefacts felt entirely wrong. And it was not just because they were Dark, oh no. Few things were surrounded by an aura of repulsion and wrongness like this.

“What are these things, your Majesty?”

But it was not the leader of the Exchequer who answered. It was the Queen, and her icy tone and the half-hissed words conveyed perfectly her displeasure.

“These three enchanted artefacts are Horcruxes.”

For a moment, he stayed with his mouth wide open. No, surely no one was *that* stupid. A Phylactery was already dangerous enough to create, and it was something which was done under the protection of a Dark Power. It was also a cheap form of immortality, because other Dark Wizards could easily track the soul container. But at least it was stable, had interesting properties to draw on and you could rapidly recreate a body – four or five days – without requiring anyone’s help.

A Horcrux was none of these things. It could be only created on four or five nights per year where the Dark was at its most powerful, you had to kill someone in cold blood and feel good doing it. The moment you did it, you were cursed for all eternity by the Dark Powers and your appearance progressively degraded to something less than human. Most Dark Lords wisely chose to abandon this avenue of research by that point, but there was worse. A Horcrux was astonishingly unstable. You couldn’t feel regret anymore for a single second of your life. For the rest of your time in this reality, you had to experience the darkest of emotions in your mind and accept them as an essential part of yourself. Herpo the Foul, a low-ranked Rook of the Exchequer, had been the inventor of this monstrosity and had ended destroying his creation himself. Rumour was that the Horcrux creation had rendered him utterly insane in mere days.

But assuming you were nonetheless willing to try your chance with this method, the fact remained the destruction of your body in this case left you highly vulnerable. If one of your supporters didn’t come to you and managed to reincarnate you quickly, it was possible to be trapped for centuries as a state weaker than a ghost.

How did he know this? According to the Exchequer archives, a former member named Bishop Eternal had made a sport of punishing his subordinates by letting them create Horcruxes in the twelfth century. The written information was absolutely deranging, and if the rumours were to be trusted the Queen had thrown him to the crocodiles when the man had loudly spoken he was destined for godhood.

“Who would be mad enough to create that many Horcruxes?” He wondered aloud.

Naturally, the three soul containers all had the same magical signature. He had never studied the Arithmancy for this idiocy, but it was safe to conclude each new Horcrux was exponentially damaging your magic and your soul. And it was a conservative estimate.

“A British Dark Lord who calls himself Lord Voldemort,” Well, well, well it seemed things had gone from boring to interesting for Albus while he was in prison, no? “He is a rabid fanatic and hypocrite who should never have risen to such heights. And as we speak he is a wraith, abandoned by his followers and his ancient allies. Pathetic creature, he didn’t even manage to overthrow the British Ministry and its corrupt administration.”

“But he has other Horcruxes, hasn’t he?” For a second, the Dark Lord of Nurmengard thought Knight Priest was joking. But looking at the King and the Queen, there wasn’t any denegation spoken.

“There are three more,” agreed the most powerful Dark Wizard of all times. Six Horcruxes, this ‘Voldemort’ sounded more and more like the propaganda for madness incarnate. “And they all will be destroyed in due time.”

One by one, the diary, the locket and the ring were dropped in a large basin full of a liquid that was certainly not water. By the powerful smell, Gellert Grindelwald was ready to bet on some snake’s venom. Screams rapidly mounted from the container, and an impressive quantity of vitiated magic was released before the liquid stopped bubbling.

Without being able to explain it, there was something in his soul which hurt. But for the life of him, he couldn’t remember why.

“Your Majesty, is this destruction not going to substantially help the Order of the Phoenix?” asked the Knight Explorer. “The Death Eaters and their associates are weak and disorganised. Against Dumbledore, they will not last long. In the years to come, we will have to fight the Chief Warlock. He will muster his Order and disturb our plans.”

A rasp that could have qualified as a chuckle in other human throats was heard.

“He will try. Dumbledore has just discovered his enemy was using Horcruxes in April. Our actions are simply helping because he would never have rid us of Voldemort before we are ready to begin the real work.”

An orb of darkness materialised, showing Albus seated on a top seat in the British Wizengamot chambers.

“The Headmaster of Hogwarts has lost a great deal of prestige these last months and Operation Paradox will weaken him further, though it is not our primary objective,” the King continued speaking calmly. “To make things better for us, the wizards and witches of Britain have placed a brainless non-entity in charge and they have offended the goblins, the skinchangers, the vampires...they are all going to jump into the melee when we show them the weakness of the Ministry.”

“But the Light will always win, your Majesty.” The words came from his mouth before he knew he had uttered them. Because this was always the problem, wasn’t it? The Dark Lords and Dark Ladies were not supposed to win, Fate and its prophecies always made sure of that. Six Powers of Darkness against Seven Powers of Light, this was the situation in every story.

“Not always,” the correction sounded like a threatening growl and the cloud of darkness tripled in size. “If the Light always wins, how is it possible that I have the original Round Table in my possession for one thousand and five hundred years? I have not forgotten Camlann...”

Gellert’s eyes turned to the Light Treasure in the shape of the table and paled. This table was the true Round Table?

“Trinity, Army of Light, Order of the Phoenix, Grand Alliance, ICW...they can and will fall,” concluded the King of the Exchequer. “You can’t win a war without gold, wizards, heroes, and time...”

**16 July 1993, Oxford, England**

Oxford was a bit too warm for Alexandra in the middle of July. There were also too many tourists and people walking for her taste. She was sweating profusely, and of course the ice-cream sellers were all under attack from thirsty crowds.

Aside from these minor details, the view was not exactly bad. But then Tolkien was born here and the author of her favourite book must have taken his architectural inspiration from somewhere. The universities at the centre of the city were quite spectacular, though since she had seen Hogwarts and other magical constructions, the awe had massively decreased. Plus you couldn’t visit the inside of the schools just like this, not without paying a dozen pounds.

To sum-up, the centre of Oxford was certainly not a cheap and low-class location. Judging by the prices practised by some shops, there was some high-way robbery involved. Not that the large crowds seemed to care. When the tourists weren’t removing their T-shirts on the grass of the parks to look like boiled lobsters, they were joyously making the queue in front of one of the souvenir shops to spend in a few minutes a year’s worth of hard-earned money.

The more she thought about it, the more Alexandra was convinced that Gilderoy Lockhart of all people giving her an appointment here was not a coincidence. In his ‘fraud persona’, the blonde-haired wizard who had been their DADA ‘teacher’ should indeed love this place. Unless Lockhart the famous author decided that all the other celebrities potentially in the city were by their Muggle nature completely unable to understand his greatness.

“Piers, keep an eye on the streets and the crowd,” the Potter Heiress told the member of the Dudley Gang she had politely asked to accompany her today. The boy nodded weakly, his face a bit pale from the Apparition which had taken them here. Fortunately, he had stopped vomiting. And yes, for a reason which escaped her, the stomachs of the non-magical children did not tolerate well the Apparition effects.

“Yes, boss.”

Alexandra did her best not to sigh. If she had had the choice, she would have come with Morag. Unfortunately, the grand escape of the Dark Lord Grindelwald had restored a lot of security procedures at MacDougal Manor and Lord Alan had told his Heiress in no uncertain terms she was not to leave Ireland until the time came to go shopping at Diagon Alley, or the ICW recaptured the fugitive.

As a result, the Dudley Gang was her sole source of reinforcements and their catastrophic driving style when they had left the village of Rashtam had convinced her they were nowhere near ready to pass their driving licence test.

“I don’t think it is too risky. But Lockhart is a spy, so who knows what his mission’s orders are.”

The man had not the martial skills of James Bond or the magical skills of Flitwick. If it came to a fight, Alexandra thought she could take him. But underestimating someone was never good for your health and thus she had come with Piers Polkiss as back-up.

Although when she had received the address arrived via owl-mail, Alexandra had imagined fewer possible witnesses. Casting magic or waving a sword in this crowd would cause a major incident.

Piers disappeared in the noisy groups of inebriated teenagers, and Alexandra descended the street to meet her contact. It was not hard to find him. In his best and inimitable fashion, Gilderoy Lockhart was seated at a table with a sort of large Mexican hat on his head and a huge fake moustache. Many people were taking photos or laughing at him.

It was Hogwarts all over again, she knew. Who would think of this man as a threat when he was behaving like this?

“Good afternoon, Professor,” the Ravenclaw student said once she sat on a chair next to him. She had not disguised herself or used Charms beforehand to mask her approach, so the blonde-haired wizard did not manifest any surprise. “Nice hat.” Inwardly, Alexandra wondered if she could buy it somewhere just to listen to the Sorting of September with it. It would be against clothes regulations and cost House Points...not that she cared about that worthless competition anymore.

“Thank you, Miss Potter,” replied Lockhart, smiling and waving at a young woman with a camera around her neck.

The green-eyed witch waited for her interlocutor to reveal the reason why the spy had judged it wise to send her several letters demanding her attention but it didn’t come. Half-ignored and sweaty under the hard sun, she ordered a cold lemon juice from the owner of the bar and watched with attention the hundreds of men, women and children in the streets. It was somewhat humbling to see that if the entire magical population of Britain was gathered in a single place, the wizards would have more or less parity in numbers with Oxford. The lemon juice when it arrived calmed a bit her thirst, but Alexandra felt uncomfortable in her white T-shirt and old jeans. She would have to take a very cold shower once she Apparated back to Ireland.

“You should not have used the Right of Conquest back in April,” the photographs and other curious tourists had moved on, and Lockhart had apparently decided this was the perfect time to talk. “There were several incidents involving uncontrolled magic all over the world that day.”

Alexandra wished she was astonished by her former Professor’s words. But she was not. Killing a Basilisk was a notable deed and it had to attract attention magically, for better and for worse. Moreover, she was a Champion of the Morrigan, another complicating factor. Given her luck, she could already guess the ‘incidents’ had not been pleasant and Lockhart’s grim expression was supporting this idea.

Perhaps Alexandra shouldn’t say out loud that for her, it had been worth it in the end. Without the boost of magic and vitality provided by the death of the first Basilisk, she would not have survived thirty seconds in the Chamber of Secrets. Yes, it was too bad for the people suffering from the after-effects of the Claim of Conquest, but honestly, no one had really volunteered to kill the Basilisk, get rid of the Heir, or generally do their damned jobs. And at the first opportunity, Dumbledore would have seized the Basilisk carcasses for his profit.

“Adult wizards and witches are supposed to keep an eye on things like that. The ICW and the Ministry have Departments whose very existence is to solve these problems.” She didn’t ask what use they were if they didn’t do what they were paid for, but she definitely had the sentence on the tip of her tongue. “Besides, the Claim of Conquest is not illegal. It’s old magic and was not used for a long time, but I broke no laws invoking it.”

Judging by the glare Lockhart sent her, this was not the answer he had wanted to hear. Well, too bad for him.

“One of the incidents is a very ugly and illegal practise of Blood Magic based on paintings. Does the name ‘Portrait of Ruin’ mean anything to you?”

For this question, she could afford to be honest.

“Not at all, I’ve never heard of it before.” The name sounded like bad news but then it was hardly the only evil thing the Wizarding World had created in the last millennia. Basilisks and the Unforgivables came to mind...

“Why should I have heard of it anyway? Blood Magic is completely forbidden by the Ministry and it is not taught at Hogwarts.” Rosier, Riddle, and the other Slytherins of the Heir Conspiracy had used it this year, but they must have searched in their family libraries to find the knowledge. There was no section in the Hogwarts library on the subject.

“The power behind the magical activation was extremely potent.” Lockhart was really measuring all his words today, wasn’t he? “The most likely scenario is that one of your ancestors painted these artworks and cursed them thoroughly.”

Remembering the Houses she was descended from, this was a very frightening issue. The Blacks, to use the most infamous example, were known for their mental instabilities, their wealth, their will to ignore the laws they found inconvenient, and their lethal Dark spells.

“It’s interesting, all right. But I can’t help you on the subject.” She made a small sign of her hand to cut down any possible protests. “Can’t, it is not that I don’t want to. The possessions of House Potter and what exactly my grandparents and my parents owned was destroyed or has disappeared. Their former friends and enemies have raided everything they owned. The history and the businesses of my family have been dispersed to the four winds.”

And a lot of these objects/artefacts/heirlooms had not been registered at Gringotts, good luck trying to find them. And the goblins of Gringotts were not infallible. Grimjaw had done his best, but he still had not managed to track the Invisibility Cloak and the Pensieve her father had taken from the ancestral vault and never returned.

“You would have better chance interrogating Dumbledore.” It was a suggestion Alexandra knew Lockhart would never take. Being a spy and unprotected by a teacher’s contract, the blonde-haired man would not take the risk being in the same room as the man who had imprisoned the Dark Lord Grindelwald.

“Would you consent to create a Seal? My superiors would be extremely thankful if these Dark creations were neutralised and your magic may be the key...”

“No,” Alexandra didn’t let him finish the sentence. A Seal was including a few drops of blood and forcing your magic on an object until it absorbed your essence. Morag had impressed her how important it was...it was a process involved in the creation of a Gringotts Keys, by the way.

“It may be the only solution available.”

“And I said no,” retorted the Potter Heiress as she stood up and gave a bank note of twenty pounds to the waitress. “If you think I’m going to leave in your possession a Seal, maybe your time spent as a superb fraud has addled your brain.”

The frown on Lockhart’s face seemed genuine, though. And that raised interesting questions. There were not many countries in the world not respecting the sanctity and the traditions of the centuries-old Blood customs. For the English-speaking countries, the Americans and the Australians were firmly included on this small list. After long months of guessing, she had finally a clue where the former DADA Professor had transferred his allegiance to.

“You don’t trust me.”

“I trust you to be loyal to whatever mission your superiors have given you,” the green-eyed witch affirmed sincerely.

“If this is your decision, I won’t be able to give you more information on the Exchequer.”

Alexandra chuckled and saluted the new tourists wanting to photograph the Mexican hat.

“They have destroyed Nurmengard and helped Grindelwald escape his prison; that is all the information I need.” Alexandra spoke to him a last time before disappearing in the large crowd. “You should worry far more what their plans for your government are...”

**3 August 1993, Somewhere in the North Sea**

Dudley wanted to go home. He was cold. He was on a large boat in the middle of nowhere. He was surrounded by madmen. He had a raging beast inside his body.

It was a nightmare. It was a nightmare full of vampires, wererats, and wizards.

He wanted to go home, eat a large meal prepared by his Mom.

Dudley was hungry. Each time they had forced him to transform, he lost weight and his belly ached.

He was on a boat and this was nothing like the cruises he had ridden on holidays. The sky was black. The water was dark. The wind was awfully cold.

They wanted him to fight. He wanted to go home.

The big rats and the other leaders told them this was a glorious battle. If it was like the hunting he did at school, they were going to be royally screwed.

He was afraid. He didn’t want to be here.

His parents and his friends didn’t know where he was. If he died there, nobody was going to care.

“THREE HOURS BEFORE LANDING SOLDIERS! THREE HOURS AND WE ARE AT AZKABAN! KNOW NO FEAR AND WE WILL BE VICTORIOUS!”

The screams in the megaphone made him flinch. He didn’t like them. He didn’t like the ‘mission’. And he didn’t like the place they were travelling to.

Rumours said it was an evil place. An island guarded by demons and evil wizards.

Dudley was trying to think of a plan to go back home.

It didn’t look good.

**Author’s note**: I think readers will realise without a lot of problems what will be involved next chapter. The tentative title for chapter 47 is ‘They will Know Fear’ and will recount the details of Operation Alcatraz.

Nurmengard was first, now it is another prison’s turn to be assaulted...

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