**Chapter 109**

**See Venice and Die**

**17 February 1995, Venice**

Thank the Morrigan, there was still a Venice when they arrived.

It was a massive relief, because the Exchequer member who had been their last information source had not been terribly optimistic about the situation.

Then again, the fact three Champions had been able to appear before the gondola pier of the church of Santa Maria della Salute was not really something you could rejoice about.

They were deep into the city, and the time-freezing had clearly stopped.

"Well," Lyudmila Romanov began with a wolfish smile, "we clearly arrived in time for the final battle."

There was an enormous magical pulse.

The explosion came right after it.

In the distance, the newly created volcano, kept silent by the artifice of the Exchequer, released its fury in an instant.

Flames soared, and an enormous amount of Fire magic began to spread everywhere. The waters of the lagoon weren't staying idle either; countless cascades and geysers were suddenly triggered, and the magic imbuing the aquatic environment was properly crazy...and likely would have been considered a major violation of the Statute, if it wasn't something that had lost its importance days ago.

The Planes of Fire and Water had a new dominion here...and Alexandra had no doubt the Ring of the Niebelungen had just been destroyed.

"Chaos," Eleonora da Riva complained while the Potter Heiress was watching the unprecedented spectacle of destruction and renewal, "could you please stop taunting Fate?"

"Oh, come on, you say it like-"

"DIE, SPAWN OF THE DARK!"

Light magic, the lethal kind was hurled at them.

Alexandra took a step back and attacked.

"REDUCTO!"

The white-cloaked mage of the Army of Light looked very surprised as suddenly, there was a large hole where his chest had been.

"She is right, please stop taunting Fate," the Champion of Death said seriously. "And let's be careful. The Exchequer told us the magical and non-magical authorities began the evacuation of the city a few minutes ago, but as this imbecile just proved, there are certainly fanatics who survived until the time-freezing."

Truthfully, the release of so much magic should have been...exciting. Instead, Alexandra was feeling only dread. The Grail was minutes away from blowing up, and the three Champions were still far away from the Plaza di San Marco. Yes, it was far away...but they weren't going to be able to cross the Grand Canal the old-fashioned way, not with the monumental whirlpools and the treacherous currents swirling into existence.

"We run to the next bridge?" the Champion of Innocence asked, in a tone that revealed she knew already the answer.

"We run to the next bridge," Alexandra said darkly. "I protect the Ark of Death, I am the only one to be able to touch it after all. Lyudmila, you're the vanguard."

"Thought you would never ask, Death."

"Don't be arrogant," Alexandra retorted. "We began this adventure with far more Champions than we currently have." They had been forced to leave Malatesti with the Exchequer's ship once they left the Conqueror's Grave behind them, as he would have been more of a burden than a source of firepower, and this was one strong asset removed from their group of Champions.

There was nothing to add, and the three witches rushed westwards towards the bridge near the Galleria dell' Academia.

Nobody attacked them.

Of course, that didn't mean that Venice was calm and peaceful around them.

Everywhere, there were the loud sounds of Apparition, and hundreds of wizards and witches were appearing and disappearing...sometimes before being hit by battle-spells. Those attacks were invariably bringing a lot of retaliation in the form of Dark Curses seconds later. Quite clearly, the battle was not over.

But the actors of this killing were ignoring them, and Alexandra wasn't going to complain. She ran like the other Champions, levitating the Ark of Death by her side.

Besides, once the Grand Canal was behind them and they charged into the streets that would lead them ultimately to the heart of Venice, there was one more thing to worry about.

Far above their heads, the Dark Sun shone.

They shouldn't have been able to watch it without using their Animagus vision, but here the cursed sun was radiating like an eclipse should, and with every breath, it seemed to become more...alive. Alive and all-consuming.

"By the way," the Dark Queen somehow managed to find enough air to run and speak like they were just sitting around a dinner table, "what do you intend to do about the treasures of the Conqueror's Grave? I noticed you did call a lot of House Elves to transport the loot elsewhere before we left?"

"You mean once the curses will all have been removed and we will be sure there's nothing that is going to Possess or blow up someone?" Alexandra asked rhetorically. Before they returned to Venice, she had told the Zabini Elves to be careful and keep the artefacts under maximum security measures. "I admit I don't know. Maybe I will open a museum with it? With the Statute ending, both societies will certainly acclaim it as a unique discovery..."

For all the megalomania and the arrogance of Alexander of Macedon, you couldn't exactly deny he was a figure of major historical significance.

The colossal diversity of the treasures might be a problem, though. Alexandra wasn't a specialist, but she was nearly certain the valuable pieces – of which there were thousands – had been taken from locations going from Macedon to the Indus river, and from Egypt to the steppes of Central Asia. The number of nations which had a possible claim on these historical pieces, magical or not-magical, was...not small.

"Let's focus on surviving first, shall we?" Eleonora made sure the idea was out of her head as fast as it had entered it. "In case you have forgotten, the Grail is soon going to be in reach, out of the time-freeze...but seconds after, so will Ra. I hope you have a good plan-"

"I deal with the Grail," Alexandra grimaced, "you keep that bastard of an Archmage away from me for as long as you can. I hope the King of the Exchequer will be free to act before him, but since the Avatar of the Dark was the one to cast this ritual, he will likely be the last one cast out of the time-freeze."

"Two against one," for once the Champion of Loki didn't boast or show an exaggerated amount of confidence, "we aren't going to last long against him. Yes, he doesn't have Excalibur anymore, but I'm not sure he really needed it..."

"Keep him away from me a few minutes," Alexandra swallowed heavily. "I don't expect miracles, but..."

The Basilisk Slayer almost cursed herself after she said the words. Based on the previous duel where Ra had humiliated her, fighting the Avatar of the Light for a minute was already a miraculous exploit, always assuming the Avatar of the Light decided to fight you seriously.

They had other choices. But the alternative options were far worse.

And they were out of time to summon new plans out of their hats.

Before them, the time-freezing receded faster and faster, and the three female Champions were able to pass under the arches that were the last landmark before the Plaza di San Marco.

Suddenly, the cursed Light of an artefact that should have never been created half-blinded her, forcing her to change her eyes into a Hydra's.

"One last battle," the Ravenclaw Champion murmured, "and a last impossible quest."

Then there were no words in her mouth to waste.

"ACCIO GRAIL!"

The Ark of Death had already descended touched the pavement.

The unimaginably powerful Chalice of Plagues tried to resist her spell, of course.

It took her about five times as much energy as it would have taken her to Accio a simple cup.

The Grail was fighting her all the way.

And while resisting her magic, the fissures began to spread. Small pieces of Light-infused metal from another reality fell, creating devastating blasts that hurt her senses.

The effort made her nose bleed and her eyes go blurry...but like everything, the Grail of Ages had a limit to its resistance, and it fell into the Ark of Death at last.

"Straif, Oil, Ur," for this ritual, the Ogham Runes were going to be really needed, Eldar Futhark wasn't powerful enough, and Hieroglyphs were far too slow to be useful there, "seal the gate, preserve the future-"

"**AETERNAM SOLEM**!"

Something huge was thrown in her direction, and though it missed her, it was very close...and it was only when the 'projectile' had impacted the wall that Alexandra realised it was in fact Lyudmila. The Champion of Loki had massive wounds and burns all over her body. Naturally that meant-

Alexandra drew the Orichalcum sword she had borrowed from the Conqueror's Grave.

Just in time.

Her first swing cut in a blinding wave of molten gold...and the second was just fast enough to avoid losing her head as Ra had appeared behind her with a new blade smelling like an apocalyptic fire to her senses.

It was in fact an attack so powerful the Orichalcum sword was beginning to suffer damage...

"Good night, Archmage," the Potter Heiress sarcastically began, "could you please stop try to damage all my swords? All your Apprentices and followers have the same disturbing goal to break my weapons, I would like to end this battle with my blade intact, thank you-"

"**You are damned, a stain the Light must erase at all costs**," the Archmage thundered, and it took all she had to parry the next two attacks. "**I don't know how you corrupted the Ark of the Covenant, but it doesn't matter. I will purify it, restore the Grail...and you won't live to watch another dawn**."

And then the bells of Venice began to toll.

There was a pulse, a pulse and a whimper.

Several hourglasses – the famous time-turners – fell and crashed upon the pavement of the Plaza.

The aura of Light which was so dolorous, so insanely powerful...it was contested, and its radiance faded as it came under attack.

"Weren't you forgetting a little detail in your great plan, Archmage?"

And then Alexandra jumped away, taking the Ark of Death with her.

Normally, this should have been a death sentence for her.

But Ra was way too busy casting a shield to avoid being incinerated by an inferno of black flames.

**18 February 1995, Plaza di San Marco, Venice**

Eleonora groaned and returned to consciousness.

The Champion of Innocence regretted it immediately.

The air was suffocating with magical power.

Fire, Water, Light, and Darkness...everything was just...just awful, and she was a Champion of the Light. If it was that unpleasant for her, what was-

And then the pain erupted in her body.

It was agony. It lasted only a few seconds, but it was certainly enough to contemplate how burned she had been by the spell of the Archmage.

It gave her nausea.

One attack, she had been taken down in a single attack and-

"Please don't panic...we need to stay calm."

As her regeneration abilities kicked in, the Venetian Champion was able to turn her head and watch Alexandra Potter.

Who seemed alive...alive and with her hands plunged into-

"Are you..." Innocence's Chosen cleared her throat, "are you doing what I think you're doing?"

"If you think I'm keeping the Grail from blowing up in our faces," the green-eyed British Champion grunted in exhaustion, "you are completely right. Beith. Ur. Muin. Chain. Power. Release!"

There was a flash of green light, and something...shivered.

Eleonora paled.

It seemed as if the Veil separating the dead from the living was getting thinner...or that Death was getting closer to all of them.

It was hellishly dangerous. Releasing the power of the Grail attuned to Death bit by bit in the same location was just a very bad idea. It demanded an impressive amount of concentration, mastery over one's magic, and deep knowledge into esoteric magic. If it went wrong, they would likely destroy Venice, Italy, and a good part of Europe in the process...

But looking to her right, there was no need to ask why the Dark Champion had decided for such a risky course of action.

Not when the two Avatars were facing each other, mere metres away.

They were not disguised or using any artefact, not even magical wands.

There were no illusions.

The twin brothers who had been the Heirs of the Ancient Magical Kingdom looked so much alike nobody could have mistaken them for anything but family.

One was clad in white robes, and his was an aura of Light.

His opponent was clad in black robes, and where he waited, the Dark dominated.

Compared to this, the Plaza di San Marco was fading away, the monuments pale shadows...making Eleonora acknowledge someone had likely erected powerful wards and magical barriers to protect the rest of Venice from what was to come.

Unless it was to ensure someone wouldn't escape.

One didn't exclude the other, unfortunately.

The Light Champion was saying 'unfortunately', because, right now, she was dreaming of fleeing this battlefield.

What had she been thinking?

What the hell had they been thinking?

This was a duel of antediluvian monsters.

No matter how talented or powerful, no matter how far above their peers they really were...this was a level of magic they couldn't match.

"**By the rivers of sand**," Osiris, Avatar of the Dark, was the first to break the silence, "**I have been waiting for this moment for a very long time, Ra**."

"**I hope you're not going to spend hours gloating**," his twin brother growled, "**I have other things to do...and your speeches are always lacking in everything**."

"**Victory**," the King of the Exchequer looked at the Ark of Death with an amused expression before returning to stare at his nemesis. "**To be perfectly honest, I doubted many times I would live to see that day. But now...now it seems at last victory can be achieved**."

"**You overestimate your strength**," Ra retorted coldly, his eyes shining with frightening fanaticism, "**I have lost Life, that much I won't argue with, but you forget a bit too fast Fate is still bound to my will. What has been done can be reversed in due time**."

"**Oh, absolutely**," the Avatar of the Dark replied as if it was nothing but a minor inconvenience. "**But I will remind** you, **enslaving the Power of Fire is not an easy Task. You can defeat the Champion, but the Power? The Powers have seen what your word is worth, and what use you had for them**."

"**I did not enslave them**."

"**A chain is a chain, and a collar is a collar. Surely you are not so deaf to ignore the wrath of Fire unleashed**?"

The anger which showed up on Ra's face was properly...terror-inducing.

Removing one Power from his grasp, Innocence's Chosen thought, had really angered the Archmage beyond what she had thought possible.

"**But you won't have a chance to enslave more souls and Powers, Ra**," Osiris summoned his Cloak of Darkness, along with two other Dark artefacts of incredible magical power, an Eye-shaped ring and an Uraeus staff. "**I am going to end your life tonight**."

"**Even in the unlikely chance you can best me**..." the Lord of the Light bared his teeth, "**you can't. You can't kill me, Osiris! If you tried and succeeded, you would seal your own destruction**!"

"**You never change, don't you? Always-**"

"**Your Champions have visited Alexander's Grave. They must have been given the truth. Hear their voice, if you don't trust mine**."

It was...frightening to be on the receiving end of the Avatars' attention.

Especially as you knew you couldn't do anything to stop them from killing you if they went on the attack. Lyudmila Romanov was still trying to crawl as most of her body bled and writhed under the curses she had been hit with. Eleonora herself was wandless and severely injured. Alexandra Potter was maybe in a state to fight, but most of her attention was on the Ark and the Grail within its depths, and for good reason.

"We were told...there was a reason why the old Pharaoh trusted the Archmage here so much."

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Alexandra didn't pay attention to most of what Eleonora da Riva said.

All that mattered was the Grail in the Ark of Death, and making sure it didn't explode, killing everyone in the process.

It was...extremely unpleasant.

The Grail didn't like her, and it had no problem fighting her evocations.

As she was forced to plunge her hands into the emerald-burning abyss of the Ark, the sensation could be described as if a thousand snakes were biting her at once.

Thank the Morrigan, the Ravenclaw was a Lernaean Hydra. She could heal as fast as she was hurt.

But it wasn't pleasant at all.

At last, after what felt like four hours, the Grail appeared to be magically chained to a Runic Lokk of her invention. It was losing its potency slowly, forced to release Light energy at a steady pace, and the inferno imbued by Ra was immediately changed into Death-attuned magic.

It wasn't exactly pretty or an optimal scenario, but it was the only real path she had seen, and since there was only one Champion of Death...

Breathing in relief, Alexandra withdrew her hands from the Ark, and looked up towards the Archmage and the King of the Exchequer.

If the silence was any indication, the tale of the Conqueror's Grave had been told to Osiris.

"**I see**." At this moment, despite the cloak shrouding most of his body in darkness, the King very much looked like a phlegmatic Egyptian scribe. "**I suppose one of my theories was relatively close to the truth, then**."

What?

"**You knew**?" Ra hissed. "**For all these millennia, you knew and you said nothing**-"

"**I suspected**," his twin brother retorted calmly. "**And in case you had any doubt, I am not going to feel guilty about your rant. You clearly knew, and yet you never bothered informing me or anyone of that little detail...save a few exceptions**."

"How?" Alexandra asked slowly. "We were given this shocking revelation by Alexander, and I suspect this wasn't the case for you..."

Osiris, Avatar of the Dark, King of the Exchequer, the most powerful Dark Wizard of the entire world...chuckled.

"**I wouldn't have suspicions if *someone***," the irony was particularly biting, "**had decided not to give himself the good role in a few tales that were intended to 'prove' his divine infallibility. By the blood which gave us birth, Ra. You guarding the Solar Ark against a gigantic worm called *Apophis,* a direct translation of 'Great Enemy' in the old tongue? The story of a certain God bearing my name being carved apart but being resurrected by Isis to be perpetually on the brink of death? You could have told the fools worshipping you that you were the rampart against the return of the Great Enemy, it would have been possibly more subtle than what you tried**!"

"**THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY ANYTHING**?"

The roar forced everyone to pause, as the fury in Ra's voice had been...reeking of fanaticism and madness.

"**I didn't say anything, because these were only suspicions**..." the King of the Exchequer gave his twin a glare that was properly...unamused. "**And then when I had several theories, I stayed silent because it didn't change *anything***."

"**What? It is the Great Enemy we're speaking about! It is**-"

"**The Great Enemy didn't destroy our home! The Great Enemy didn't kill our entire family! The Great Enemy didn't raze everything, didn't transform verdant lands into a desert, and have the gall to call it peace**!"

For a moment, a brief moment, the Avatar of the Dark truly revealed what he had kept for so long in his heart.

"**I eradicated the traitors and the vile conspirators who had broken their oaths against my Throne**!" Ra barked. "**For all your protests, you have been influenced by the whispers of the Great Enemy**!"

"**Like you have tried to influence some of my lieutenants to turn against me by revealing I may be the host of our father's foe, you mean**?"

Ra gaped, and he wasn't the only one. What did he-

"**I've always wondered what sort of argument you had found to convince Flamel and a few other dedicated men to turn against me**," Osiris continued, speaking like it was a point of no consequence. **"He wasn't the first, and I had my suspicions. The goblins' stab in the back could be explained by their unreasonable greed, but wizards I had taught for decades? That was quite a mystery...a** **mystery that is now resolved**."

"**It**..." Ra seemed lost for words...and if she was honest, Alexandra enjoyed it a lot. "**You can't afford to wound me, be it in body or soul!**"

"**Assuming you and your incompetent lieutenants understood correctly the words of our father, yes**," the doubt in the King of the Exchequer's words hinted very much that he entertained said doubts.

"**You doubt my word and Alexander's**?"

"**Oh, absolutely**," Osiris replied in a deadpan tone. "**It doesn't help that most of the revelations I was just given betray a complete lack of understanding of the great treatises of Soul Magic that were written millennia ago. For shame, Ra, the Ba and the Ka don't work like that, and the Court of Avatars wasn't filled with untrained novices**."

The Avatar of the Dark chuckled again.

"**Still, I have not spent so many millennia waiting for victory to ruin my plans at the last minute. I suppose I can't kill you, Ra. But then as Myrddin would testify if he had not so recently perished, the Fortress of Air and several other great rituals can imprison a powerful magical being for centuries rather reliably**."

"**You assume I am going to let you imprison me! I will not let myself be exhibited like a beast inside a cage**!"

"**That's the problem with you, Ra...you always hope I work upon faith and belief like you do. I do not. If I came to Venice, it was because I judged my preparations adequate to duel you and win now that one of the Powers you enslaved has broken its chains**."

Ra snarled and threw the first battle-spell, one which seemed to disintegrate reality such was its power.

Osiris retaliated, and in a few seconds, it was as if hell had opened its gates.

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Lyudmila had always loathed crawling.

It was undignified.

It was humiliating.

It was proof you were *weak*.

"**UM SAKHAI XAVER**!"

A million daggers were conjured, and they were hurled against Ra. They swirled and attacked on unpredictable patterns.

"**MU**."

Radiance pierced the darkness, and targets of something looking like straw and rubber were conjured to intercept the daggers, one for each projectile the Master of the Dark had cast into existence.

"**NAOMH BABYLON**!"

A wave of darkness rose, and what was first a spell became ten thousand Curses, before multiplying and becoming ten times that.

The fires of light screamed, and with a new spell, ten thousand lasers erupted into the Venetian night to parry the monumental blow.

This was...

They were indeed too weak, Lyudmila was forced to acknowledge.

This lethal contest of Transfiguration was beyond all teachers and students of Durmstrang...beyond every school of magic in existence.

"**STYMPHALIAN ALKHAIA**!"

A legion of Stymphalian Birds was conjured, and the vulture-like birds wasted no time beginning a bombardment of metallic feathers.

"**PHOENIX SOLAIS**!"

As many ephemeral phoenixes as there were Dark-conjured birds appeared, staying only a few seconds before each took a vulture conjuration with it in oblivion.

This wasn't just a level of mastery, the apex of magical conjuration and banishment...it was something the Champion of Loki had never seen.

And it also answered her question why no member of the Exchequer had dared to intervene.

Now that the Durmstrang Champion saw it with her own eyes, it was obvious.

No Dark Wizard or Witch had come to support their leader in person because they would have been massive weaknesses, not advantages.

As it is, they were best served by staying at long-range, and protecting the Champions of Magic...like her.

There was a reason, after all, they hadn't been incinerated, changed into molluscs, or any other unpleasant fate the Avatar of the Light had for them.

"**TIANIR DRACONIS**!"

Osiris conjured...a dragon. An enormous dragon of dark flames and death, as tall as the Basilica di San Marco. Ra retaliated by conjuring a white dragon. And the monstrous conjurations slammed into each other, a contest of flames, fangs, maws, and Dark against Light.

Lyudmila crawled away until she found herself by the side of Alexandra Potter, who was trying to keep an eye upon the depths of the Ark, all the while her attention focused unavoidably upon the duel of Titans occurring before them.

"Old Fossils, eh?" the Champion of Death voiced.

Lyudmila grimaced. She had asked for this one, to be honest.

"With the benefit of hindsight, I believe my insult was a bit too hasty and inaccurate."

"Good." The younger witch bit her lip, before continuing, "I had never thought you could use conjuration like that. It demands too much mental concentration, raw power, and if you miss a move, the spell doesn't work. Or so the graduating students of the Scuola Regina told me..."

"Well, they are kind of right," the Champion of Loki answered. "Your Headmaster is kind of famous for being one of the rare wizards to be able to use Transfiguration spells from start to finish because the practitioners who can boast the same can be counted on both hands. A high-level conjuring spell is already complicated, but ten? A hundred? If you're able to do it without missing a step, you're standing at such heights there is almost no one to be considered a peer..."

No one save the two Avatars, of course.

They must have already thrown fifty conjurations of such improbable difficulty the Durmstrang Transfiguration teachers would tear out what was left of their hair, and it looked like it had been merely the prelude.

Armies of black and white knights were dragged out of the void to once against wage war against each other. Constructs of flames and metal hurled rays of magic, annihilating everything it touched. Monsters ranging from mice to dragons in size were conjured, banished, and re-conjured before you had the time to blink in disbelief.

But for all these unbelievable displays, Lyudmila wasn't fooled. No matter what he tried, Ra was on the defensive. The Archmage of Light's counter-spells and solutions to avoid dying were always coming long before he was in mortal danger, but initiative and dictating the pace of the duel was not within his means.

And the...the Light Avatar must have realised he was only slowing down his defeat, because his next incantation wasn't a parade at all.

The words didn't belong to any mortal language she had learned...and yet the Russian witch understood them, and her eyes opened in horror.

"**YOU WHO STAND ABOVE THE FRAILTY OF MORTALHOOD, YOU WHO RECOGNISE THE GREAT STRUGGLE OF GOOD AND EVIL! YOU WHO REFUSED TO BOW LOW TO CORRUPTION, TO LET THE FESTERING BITES OF THE SERPENT FESTER IN THE BODY! THE SWORD NEEDS TO STRIKE, THE TIMES OF HARDSHIP MUST RETURN ONCE MORE! MIRABILIS! JUDGEMENT**!"

For one or two seconds, reality seemed to be torn apart. As the Veil between dimensions broke, Lyudmila saw something inhuman and incredibly luminous shine like a second sun-

"**CERBERUS COLLAPORTA**!"

There was a sound akin to the slamming of a door, but incredibly more violent.

And the sun of Light magic vanished as quickly as it had been conjured. Great chains of darkness imbued the fabric of reality, and the breach decreased before fading away.

Darkness returned, and it grew more oppressing.

And for once, the Archmage was shocked.

"**How? You didn't**-"

"**When I said I came prepared, Ra, I meant it. You won't be able to call a Light Power today. I won't tolerate it**."

"**That's what you pretend. I am not convinced**."

"**Feel free to try it again, but I don't think you can afford to call a Power too many times...it must be quite a strain upon your Phoenix essence, no**?"

"**I have more than enough to defeat you**!"

"**No doubt...but in case you have forgotten, you might have another problem. You see, the rise of two Powers was engineered here at Venice. And I don't think any of the two enjoyed the fact you tried to invoke Judgement**..."

Lyudmila had been about to check if she could stand again...but the new storm of magic which was unleashed convinced her to stay on her knees.

It was familiar and yet foreign, it was-

"Oh, by the Great Trickster..."

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It began with the rain.

Any other time, it shouldn't have felt very magical, but here the water that fell upon everyone's head was clearly magical.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, but remained out of sight.

The rain intensified.

It had begun at first with some gentle drops, but within a minute, it was a downpour.

The Venetian plaza was not enduring a deluge, Alexandra wouldn't go that far, but it would have felt better if they could find cover under the arches nearby.

Yet all her instincts of Hydra and human screamed her moving would be a very, very bad idea.

And so Alexandra didn't move.

The amount of rain intensified again.

And then she appeared, as if she had never left them at Athens.

"Lucrezia?"

The name was out of her mouth before the Ravenclaw witch truly thought...

"I told you we would see each other again, didn't I?"

"Yes...but...you changed..."

That was certainly a lame reply...but it was also completely true.

Lucrezia Sforza had changed. The nice dresses, the high-heeled shoes, the highly-fashionable clothes...all of that was gone.

Instead the Champion of Venus had returned in...Alexandra didn't know how to properly describe the attire? Primal?

It was still indecent. You couldn't say otherwise when she was half-naked. But the feathers of green, the simple bras and loincloth of pale blue seemed...yes, primal.

Add the crown of red-white feathers upon her head, and one might wonder if it was really the Succubus.

But it was her. The eyes might have become dangerously feline, but it was the Venetian Champion.

The changes, though...the changes were huge.

With her feet placed in strange sandals, her new copper-like skin...and of course one shouldn't forget the hundreds of feathers, there wasn't any trace of her Venetian inheritance.

In fact, she looked more like a priestess of some American magical cult that had existed before the conquistadors came and killed everyone...

She certainly did have the golden bracelets and enchanted items to follow the theme, at least.

"I did. And it was glorious. You will understand when it is your turn."

"**Tlaloc**," the Dark Queen said a God's name by her side, and the rain seemed to awake with it, thrumming and rumbling with pleasure. "You were chosen by the Aztec God of Rain...and obviously, the new Aspect of Water."

Lucrezia Sforza...purred, and as she did, her black hair changed to become the same shade of blue as her loincloth and bra.

The rain and all water in the vicinity shone with the Power of the Plane of Water, and it was as if the element was created, absorbed, and expelled from her body all at once.

"Yes, yes I did. I am now the Champion of Desire, sole and only Avatar of Water. By the Power's chosen wives and my Succubus nature, I can enforce his will and dominion upon all sources of water, from torrents to salted oceans, and from the rain to the underground sources."

This might have been considered an arrogant statement, coming from anyone else.

It really wasn't, given the sheer amount of power coming from her.

Lucrezia Sforza had already been a Lady in everything but name, but whatever transformation she had passed through in the hands of her Power, it had made her far more powerful than she was. If the Second Task happened today, Alexandra had no doubt she would lose, and very badly at that.

Overall, the only one to not show any sign of interest, fascination, or amazement...was Ra.

"**Do you really think adding one more novice Champion to our duel will tilt the balance in your favour, Osiris**?" Ra asked with sovereign contempt. "**She has more power than when I beat her the last time, but power is all she has**."

"**No**," the King of the Exchequer recognised, "**but what about one more Champion to be reborn**?"

The rain continued to drench half of the Plaza di san Marco, but on half of it, it ceased.

Alexandra almost regretted it, though since she was on the side that was drowning, it was difficult to forget they were getting very wet...

Nonetheless, the Champion of Death wasn't going to complain.

Because *Fire* came.

It began with sparks and embers, but it didn't stay limited to that.

Soon the flames soared, and the inferno began.

It was a true tide of flames, the warmth of Earth, the pulse of the planet's entrails giving life...and incinerating it if the living beings came too close.

Like Lucrezia Sforza, it was difficult to discern the moment she arrived.

When she did, it was as if she had always been there.

And the changes had been as extensive as, maybe even more than, the ones the Venetian Champion had been on the receiving end of. The new Champion they could watch was red-haired, and if the blue eyes remained, they looked like they were made of blue flames. The clothes were also red and indecent, espousing half of her curves and leaving many parts completely naked, but given how much everything burned around her, there was a legitimate doubt anyone would make the remark out loud...

"All hail," Eleonora whispered, though everyone could hear her anyway, "the Champion of Prometheus, the Pyre of Life, the Avatar of Fire...hail Fleur Delacour."

"*I am Phoenicia*," the...the being which had been the bigoted French witch *spoke*. It was like a fire bird was trying to utter something in human language, to be honest.

Ra...Ra didn't make one more remark about this not being enough to vanquish him.

For good reason.

In terms of magical mastery, spell knowledge, and versatility, neither the new Champion of Fire nor the one of Water stood a chance.

But when it came to raw power?

The two largely had the potential to give him a lot of trouble.

And of course, they weren't alone.

There was Osiris, King of the Exchequer too, equal to his twin when it came to magical power.

"**Your era ends here**."

Fleur Delacour became a red Phoenix, the very incarnation of flames, and everything burned.

Lucrezia Sforza changed, but instead of a Nundu, what replaced her human body was an enormous Jaguar...if Jaguars could reach the height of a tall horse and cast water spells, anyway.

And then the battle resumed, but this time there was Fire and Water to make everything more tumultuous.

Alexandra shook her head, and focused again on the Grail. She had neutralised its potential to extinguish all life temporarily, now how to get rid of it?

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Evidently, at three against one, the battle was now anything but fair.

Or so someone believing in fighting 'fair' would say.

Lyudmila didn't share that point of view.

The more Ra stayed alive, the more the Champion of Chaos felt her hatred for him grow out of control. Anything that could remove this pestilence from this world was undoubtedly a good thing.

If more fighters could attack him and force upon him an early defeat? Lyudmila hadn't a problem with that.

"Not joining them, Chaos?"

"I'm a Champion, Innocence, I'm not a death-seeker." The Fenrir Animagus kept her eyes on the cataclysmic fight. "I know very well I wouldn't survive for long in the melee."

It hurt her to say it, but it was the truth.

Days ago, it would have been no trouble to crush Delacour and Sforza together. Today? She would die. Assuming Ra didn't take care of her first, of course.

The inferno of Fire magic was so fierce there was no way her regeneration abilities would protect her from the pain. As for Water...the First Task had proven she could still drown like everybody else.

"They are that powerful?"

"As the Light Avatar said, they have the power, not the knowledge," Lyudmila growled. "But since the only goal is to be the hammer for the Dark Avatar's anvil, it isn't that much of a problem."

Let her be blunt on one thing: if Fire and Water had been alone, they would have lost. Life and Desire had empowered their Champion-Avatars to an absurd degree, but Ra's skills and magical mastery were on an entirely different level. The Archmage would have won.

But with his brother present?

It was an entirely different story.

The 'Transfiguration duel' was over. The Dark Avatar was moving in for the victory. Drops of fire were transformed into Alchemical reagents via improvised rituals that should have been impossible, then combined into insanely powerful attacks.

For every breath you took, Osiris was casting and throwing at least five or six new Curses, all of them enough to kill an adult wizard. The battlefield was filled with illusions of the King, and all of them were casting offensive battle-magic at the same time.

Dangerous plants rose from levitating pots, and from these Herbology nightmares thousands of maws were opening, with lianas striking and pollens altering your senses. And of course the Transfiguration onslaught hadn't ceased, it was just combined with everything else. Which was a massive problem for Ra, because in the midst of the rain, for all the night vision you could have, it was hellishly hard to see all the daggers and enchanted conjurations coming to bleed you.

The Light Tyrant did his best, and it was incredibly impressive.

Pressed by a mini-tsunami on one side and a relentless flame tornado on the other, the Archmage was managing to repel them, all the while parrying salvo after salvo of spells sent by his great rival.

But it was a defensive strategy fuelled by desperation, and this couldn't continue for long.

The first object to find a flaw was a dagger, and it went to stab his hand.

Then it was a whip of flames which lacerated his back.

An onyx arrow imbued with half a hundred Curses took him in the leg.

Several Light shields failed at once, and Water which must be as dangerous as an Acid spell added more damage.

Ra grunted in pain, but his leg blazed in a pyre of Light...a fatal distraction, as some sort of demonic cactus was conjured around the other leg.

There was no 'unblockable' spell, no decisive Dark Curse or outrageously powerful artefact to make a difference. Sforza and Delacour just continued their relentless hammering in their Animagus forms – and Sforza's feline gave her the urge to transform and give that jaguar monster a good lesson, some things didn't change. The King of the Dark attacked over and over, not showing a single sign of exhaustion despite the effort being properly out of the capacities of mortal wizards. Torrents of poisoned frogs replaced explosive candles, black spikes were summoned to follow smoke and ancient hexes.

This was just a relentless assault, one with Fire, Water, and Dark. It was never-ending...and Ra wasn't given a single second to catch his breath.

For all his fanaticism and bigotry, Lyudmila was going to give him that: the Archmage wasn't a coward.

His back metaphorically against the wall, Ra fought like a madman. His mouth and his limbs never ceased calling more Light magic, hurling more spells, and throwing more counters to continue this battle for a few more minutes.

But everything had an end.

His Phoenix regeneration had limits, and the arrows and other weapons embedding themselves in his flesh became so numerous the Light-imbued flesh faltered and withered.

The legs were trapped by countless carnivorous plants. The torso broke under half a hundred devastating Dark Magic Curses.

The white cloak burned. A conjured staff broke, giving a couple more seconds only for one hand to burn in Fire magic.

Then a spear made of water impaled him just below the neck.

"**If only that imbecile had not destroyed Excalibur with his stupid plan**..." the Archmage seethed. "**I would have triumphed here**!"

"**Possibly**," the King of the Exchequer admitted before conjuring more chains of black metal which tore the flesh of his brother and trapped hands and legs. "**But your Fate-empowered tricks have protected you for too long, and now the ancient Power of Magic is all but spent**."

Lyudmila smiled...and then someone screamed next to her.

With stupefaction, she realised that the scream came from Alexandra Potter...and that she was trying to close the Ark of Death...and failing.

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The Grail had been dissolving under the power of Death Magic when the monstrous arm rose from the Ark's depths and seized her left arm.

Alexandra didn't have time to evade this attack, and the first moment it touched her skin, it felt like she died ten times.

The pain was just too much, please, the pain had to stop-

For a moment, the Potter Heiress lost complete control.

For a few seconds, all the restraint she had upon her inner animal broke. Only one thing mattered, and it was to get out of the grasp of this monstrous arm.

Fortunately, she was a Hydra Animagus. Her strength was considerable, and no matter how powerful the arm was, it clearly did not have the might to overwhelm her.

It did try to drag her into the Ark anyway, and it took claws and a wandless Lightning attack to break free.

And when she did...Alexandra saw that the pain had been there for a reason. Where the monstrous arm had seized her, the black scales of her arm had been removed, corroded so much the regeneration was only now beginning to activate to heal the injury.

"What by Sauron-"

The arm rose from the depths once more, except it was now accompanied. They were deathly white these arms, but not as if they were made of ivory or part of a vampire's body. The appendages seemed to be radiant yet disgusting, and some metal appeared to be part of them as if they were cogs and pistons.

Alexandra reacted instinctively.

"Changelina! Sword!"

The Orichalcum Sword materialised in her hands, and Alexandra attacked. One blow was sufficient to cut the first monstrous hand, and the other one withdrew back into the depths.

The severed hand disintegrated immediately in a flash of corrupted magic. That was not good, not good at all-

Something confirmed a second later by the Grail being cast out from the Ark.

What had been the dreamy and ostentatious Chalice forged by Ra was just a ruin of an artefact.

The Light magic had been entirely removed from that abomination...but most of what had remained after the first phase had not been released to Death or Innocence.

"CLOSE THE ARK!" Eleonora shouted.

"COLLAPORTA! COLLAPORTA MAXIMA!"

The lid of the Ark was levitated and Alexandra pushed with everything she had in her core.

"Haglaz! Haglaz before, Haglaz on the right, Haglaz on the left, Haglaz behind me, Haglaz above, Haglaz below, seal the-"

There was a monumental explosion, and her Galdr's magic simply disintegrated against it.

The lid of the Ark...ceased to exist.

Alexandra hissed in fury and rushed again, the sword which had been Alexander's held in her hands.

And then the Hydra Animagus plunged it into the white substance which had come to imbue the interior of the Ark.

There was a snarl of anger, or at least it was what her senses perceived.

And for what felt like an eternity, there was a stalemate.

It was as if her attack had impaled the two monstrous arms, and blocked the monster from materialising further.

The sensation of relief didn't last long.

Soon enough, it took all she had to hold on with her sword.

They were at a stalemate, but save by channelling lighting to cover the sword, her options were definitely limited.

She was stopping the Ark from-

No...not the Ark.

The thing had never been an *Ark*.

It was now beginning to mutate and change...or more likely, to reveal its true nature.

In the last days, Alexandra had found herself with many questions, and many of them involved the great artefacts, the abominations Ra had created. Some of it was just because the things were cheating magic on a grand scale and were bloody scary. But others weren't of a more worried nature. If Ra had wanted to forge something so bloodily powerful, why the hell had he allowed the possibility of the Ark changing its attunement to the Dark?

Well, now the Champion of Death had part of the answers she sought...in the worst way imaginable.

"Never an Ark...it was..." Alexandra swallowed heavily, "a sarcophagus?"

But not a sarcophagus meant for any human having walked this earth. The shape was wrong, the very Runes carved on it were all wrong, the sorcery it emanated was wrong...

The white foam-looking layer cleared at last, and Alexandra froze.

It was-

It was-

"*Apophis*," the Hydra Animagus voiced in horror.

A second later, the two arms struck again, and this time the blow was so powerful she had no chance of maintaining her hold over the not-Ark.

Alexandra didn't allow herself to be disarmed. She held onto the Orichalcum sword for dear life.

She was still holding it when a ray of sickly white magic went through her protections like they were made of paper and threw her away like a leaf in a storm.

Alexandra didn't lose consciousness.

Given the pain the spell inflicted, this was in no way a good thing.

\*\*\*\*

What had Ra done?

Eleonora had never been impressed by the arguments of the Archmage, but she had thought he had at least a talent to forge Light artefacts which wouldn't blow up uncontrollably and do catastrophic damage.

Evidently, this belief had not survived the battle where the Grail was damaged.

But there still had been in her a certain...idea that the Avatar of Light had not taken risks that even a mad Dark Lord would balk at.

Very obviously, the Champion of Innocence had seen this foundation collapse the moment the Ark of the Covenant transformed.

No wonder it had become so easily the Ark of Death.

No wonder why so many wizards and witches were convinced the Great Artefacts of the Light were abominations.

Though they hadn't been able to realise the truth, the Champions all sensed there was something terribly wrong.

"DESTROY IT!"

Vesta's Chosen would acknowledge after the fight it was she who had screamed this in a panicky tone.

But the embarrassment was survivable.

"MUSPELLHEIM!"

The fires of Chaos were unleashed, and soon dozens of attacks followed, coming from all Champions and Avatars.

Yet they all went through the eldritch artefact like it was made of smoke.

The image her eyes allowed her to see definitely was filled with smoke, yes. But the contours were indistinct, as if her Power didn't allow her to see by fear of what awaited her vision.

But of one thing Eleonora was sure, it was this: this was no sarcophagus made by any magical or non-magical civilisation. It was a gateway. It was the gateway...the door to the Great Enemy's prison.

And it was opened.

The attacks were once again everywhere at once, but Fire, Water, and the Dark could not hit it. Eleonora was casting every offensive spell she knew, and it had no effect. The Dark Queen was casting forbidden magic like there was no tomorrow, but she might have been banishing sand for all the effect it had.

"We were told the soul was sealed within an infant...but we didn't ask what happened to the body..."

They had been duped.

Or to be more accurate...Ra had been duped millennia ago, and now they were all going to pay the price for his mistakes.

Curses and Runic evocations were spoken, enough magic to destroy an entire army burned and passed through without leaving a scratch.

And then something came out.

The contour of the figure was...hazy...distorted.

But it was enough to be convinced this was not human. It had never been human. No, no, no...

The arms came out first.

They looked white, or at least like tarnished ivory, yet twisted, too long.

The limbs helped the rest come out.

As it emerged, much like the sarcophagus-gateway itself, the pale flesh – assuming it was flesh at all – was unconcerned by the Curses and Transfiguration conjurations.

It was an inhuman horror.

It had not one head, but two. It looked like twins had been born with the same body, yet the...twisted and malicious shape told clearly this was a malicious intelligence at work, not something resulting from inbreeding.

There were four arms. Four arms, and...tentacles erupted from the chest. Four arms...but only three legs? Assuming you could call them legs, they appeared to be...twisted limbs, halfway between tails and spider's legs.

It was becoming too dolorous to look at the monster...

Finally, it fully emerged.

It was tall, taller than any human would be...and two maws opened, perfectly symmetrical, the oddity making the rest of the appearance even more twisted.

Three eyes opened, burning in a terrible sickly yellow light.

"***Accomplishment***."

The evil joy in this...this was not a word, not exactly, this was more-

The eyes turned towards them.

"***Submission***."

There was no wand or sign of hand conjuration.

Yet without warning, the Plaza di San Marco was cracking as a gigantic pentacle was carving reality apart like it was nothing, white-purple things writhing and destroying the stones.

Magic smelling like evil and looking like it exploded in all directions.

Eleonora conjured three of the most powerful shields she knew.

It wasn't enough, and soon she was shrieking in agony.

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One attack, and they were struggling to survive, surrounded by a pentacle of abominable magic and murderous shadows.

Venice had disappeared, like it had never existed.

Truly the tale of the Exchequer's Queen had not exaggerated the threat posed by the Great Enemy in the slightest.

And the worst part?

Alexandra was pretty sure it was just a small part of the enemy's ungodly power.

Because the Potter Heiress had read some lore among the Hieroglyphs.

And since the Hydra Animagus did, she had a guess how much Ra had screwed up.

Or was it the Great Enemy, the monster of monsters, which had made sure the whole tale disappeared with the ritual-casters who had vanquished him?

Alexandra, alas, was pretty sure there was no way to interrogate these long-dead wizards and witches.

"Not a soul, part of the soul..."

The Pharaoh had imprisoned the 'soul' of the Great Enemy into Osiris, that much might be true.

But the soul was never something so blatantly simple and uncomplicated.

There was *Ba*, the immortal soul. There was *Ka*, which counted technically as the soul, but also the vital energy, the spiritual double which survived the grave. There was *Haty*, the Heart, the symbol of life, the beating pulse which kept the soul in your body. There was *Ânkh*, the life-breath of the magical being. And then there was *Khaibit*, the shadow of the soul, the shard proclaiming the completeness of a magical being.

If you wanted to be sure you had everything, you also needed *Ren*, the primordial name, and *Djet*, the body, the soul given flesh and protecting the soul by anchoring you to the real world.

"They didn't defeat the Great Enemy permanently...they shattered it and sealed the fragments away."

The monster Ra himself had called Apophis levitated towards the centre of the pentacle, and trapped in a cage of shadows and evil magic, there was nothing Alexandra or anyone could do. She noted Fleur Delacour and Lucrezia Sforza had been banished magically like they had never been here...the magical signatures of Fire and Water had been dismissed from this battle like they were dolls, not Champions of Primordial Deities.

This was insane...insanely horrifying, in fact.

Because unless she was gravely mistaken?

Alexandra's best guess was that the thing that had crawled out of the not-Ark was the *Khaibit* of the Great Enemy, the monster's shadow-soul.

It would explain why the attacks of the King and everyone else were just going through the monster like it was made of smoke. It was not made of smoke...but of shadows.

By the ring of Gandalf, was there a magical field able to inflict damage to something like that?

"But it can't be just that...the shadow couldn't have engineered all that...it couldn't have acted behind the scenes for so long while the *Khaibit* was sealed away in Alexander's Grave."

The irony that the megalomaniac and his Companions may have prevented the world from coming to an end for millennia was not lost on the Morrigan's Chosen.

There had been something hidden within the Grail, something that had fed on the morons stupid enough to drink it, something that had been gleefully harvesting life-energy while the magical plagues killed billions.

It couldn't be the body or the primordial name. It wasn't the shadow, for it was imprisoned elsewhere. Osiris had certainly the *Ba*, the immortal soul. The Heart would not have any use to let anyone drink from it. By deduction, that left the *Ânkh* or the *Ka*. The life-breath or the spiritual double. Alexandra's instinct was inclined to gamble on the *Ânkh.*

This would fit what they had seen from the Grail: it was content to let Ra brainwash its fanatics, but its true goal remained to let the madmen provoke massacres and calamities so it could regain its former might.

And Ra, like the bigoted idiot he was, had let it do that by destroying the very magical kingdom which might have stopped the Great Enemy a second time.

As a result, it was hard to summon any sympathy when the abomination turned its attention to the Archmage.

"**Ka**. **Release**."

The meaning appeared to be obvious for Ra, for he tried to fight the encroaching shadows and the sickly light getting ever closer to him.

"**NO! NEVER! I am the Archmage of the Light! I will oppose you, foul creature with everything I have**!"

If he hadn't been such a bastard, Alexandra might have admired the declaration of war in due form the Archmage shouted...but this was Ra.

The Great Enemy didn't like it at all.

Four arms raised, and suddenly there were thousands of hateful Runes summoned into the air, and the very pentacle burned in acid and other heavily cursed liquids.

Ra screamed, and part of his body was mangled, butchered, and transformed into many horrible things.

It lasted a long time, all the while Alexandra tried to fight her way out of the shadows...in vain.

Ra all the while never stopped screaming...but at no point did he stop resisting either.

"***Annoyance***."

The three-legged monster teleported in front of the Lord of the Army of Light, and one of its four arms plunged into his chest.

Ra screamed even louder, and tried to change into his Animagus form.

He almost succeeded...but then the Great Enemy used its other arms to subdue the Phoenix Animagus before he could finish his transformation.

An orb swirling in seven colours was extracted, and no more words were necessary to let Alexandra and the other unwilling spectators know that yes, it was the *Ka* of the Great Enemy.

It seemed Osiris had not been the only one to have a fraction of the monster's soul sealed in him...which was in many ways logical. There was a certain symmetry and parity in giving one twin the *Ka* and the other the *Ba*...

Naturally, the Pharaoh had completely miscalculated. The *Ka* might seem less dangerous than the *Ba*, but quite clearly, it had been able to influence its host far more...or Ra had just been a cretin, it was difficult to say which issue had led them to this disaster.

"***Completion***."

The orb was assimilated into the sickly pale inhuman body, and the abomination seemed to gain in strength and grow ever more threatening.

Yet the shadows also began to fade and-

"**JI! HAN**!"

The sarcophagus-prison that had been the Ark emitted a terrifying shriek and the pentacle vanished.

A storm of hell and apocalypse struck, and the Great Enemy had to teleport in front of it and erect a massive shield of sickly yellow light in front of it so that the assault was parried in time.

Out of the clouds of twisted sorcery, Osiris, King of the Exchequer advanced, and the Dark came with him.

"***Irritant***."

"**I assure you, enemy of Keter, I intend to be far more than a mere annoyance for you**."

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This time, they were able to attack.

This time, the enemy was not immaterial anymore.

It would have been more reassuring if the thing had not countered an unimaginably powerful Chinese Storm Curse, of course.

Still, it angered her that the monster had all its attention focused on the King of the Exchequer. The thing, this Apophis, was going to pay for the insult-

"***Ba. Release***."

"You won't get your immortal soul," Osiris replied. "I didn't agree to be its guardian, but I will die first before letting you regain it."

"***Convenience. Elimination***."

Twisted power surged in phenomenal quantities around the two-headed creature, and reality screamed.

"FULMEN IMPERATOR!"

"LUX RUBICON!"

"NIFLHEIM!"

"**TIAMAT TARAN**!"

They all cast their most formidable spells without thinking. In the next days, Loki's Chosen would think back and acknowledge the irony that between one Avatar and three Champions, they had all thought the same thing: cast their most powerful spell that didn't require too much build-up time, and hope it was enough.

Lightning struck first, but the Light of Innocence was not far behind. Her ice came next...and then the fires of hell combined into some terrible void magic and raged, a hurricane of Dark magic nothing should stop.

Or that had been the hope.

The Enemy happened to disagree.

Each of the four arms grew longer and slammed the parody of a hand that was at its extremities against the spell coming to erase it from existence.

More twisted shields were summoned, and the bombardment of spells froze.

Lyudmila shouted in pain, and her two fellow Champions did the same.

It was not too dolorous compared to other experiences, but-

It was like they had left their fingers in a nasty bear's trap, and the longer the stalemate lasted, the worse the pain.

The good news was that *Apophis* didn't seem to have it easy either, as several parts of its body were cracking and some sticky substance reeking of disease was pouring out of its limbs.

The bad news was that everyone had to pour more magic into their spells just to maintain the stalemate, and those were not cheap incantations. They weren't going to be able to last more than a few minutes before emptying their magical cores...and then they would have to choose between death and-

The King of the Exchequer suddenly looked like he was mad with fury when looking at her...but no, not at her...he was looking at someone who was behind Ra.

"**RA! NO! DON'T BE STUPID, THIS**-"

"**YOU WHO DOMINATE THE GREAT WHEEL! YOU THE POWER OF MAGIC! YOU WHO SEES THE BEGINNING AND THE END! ACCOMPLISH YOUR GREAT ROLE AND LET ME FULFILL THIS WORLD'S DESTINY AS I WISH! MIRABILIS! FATE**!"

An ocean of magic detonated.

Lyudmila thought she heard the Powers, Light and Dark, scream in agony...and then there was darkness.

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"FULMEN MAGNA AEGIS! LORICA IMPERATOR!"

The lightning shield was one of her best defensive spells. The second incantation would cover her body with a layer of resistant metal.

Both would be completely ridiculous to use together at any normal time.

But the moment Ra had begun his latest moronic idea in a lifetime of fanatical stupidity, Alexandra had known deep inside it was going to be very bad.

Unfortunately, she was right.

Wherever pocket dimension the fight happened to be in, the result was utterly terrifying.

Everything exploded.

Everything burned, disappeared in a storm of elemental, Light, Dark, and the Valar only knew what other magics.

And then it ended.

It ended, and all around them, Venice began to reappear.

They were back in the Plaza di San Marco.

It had stopped raining. The fires were extinguished.

But they were back.

Lyudmila was lying not far away, unconscious.

It looked like the Champion of Loki had been unfortunate enough to have the Archmage at her back, so she had not seen him rise again...

Eleonora was moaning in pain, bleeding and looked to be in a bad state several metres away.

Osiris, King of the Exchequer, had been thrown against the walls of the Basilica, much like Alexandra had been several days ago...but he was already standing, so this was not too bad.

Of the Great Enemy, there was no trace left.

The sarcophagus-prison, the gateway of the *Khaibit*...it had begun to corrode, as if its presence in reality was something too abhorrent for this cursed world. Which was not as crazy as it might have sounded a month ago...

The artefact which had been the Ark of the Covenant and the Prison of Apophis' Shadow crumbled before disintegrating completely.

"**HA! HA! HA! I WON! I WON! MY VICTORY IS COMPLETE**!"

And then there was the madman.

The Archmage.

One might have thought he had given them the victory, but deep in her heart, Alexandra knew intimately the bastard would never have been so generous and benevolent.

No, one way or another, he had damned them. Whatever had happened with this Fate Summon, Ra had condemned them all to a course they were going to regret for years.

And he was laughing...the fanatic, the Lord of the Army of Light was laughing...

He was laughing, and all that remained of the Power of Fate had been exhausted.

"**Yes. This is the dying of the Light**."

Alexandra summoned once more the Orichalcum sword in her hand as the Morrigan whispered the words. The Ravenclaw Champion grimaced when she saw half of the blade was missing. In the inferno of the battle, she hadn't even realised...no matter.

And the Champion of Death walked towards the wizard she had grown to hate far more than Dumbledore, as ravens and hundreds of other black birds began to fill the skies above her.

Ra heard her approach.

This was not unexpected; the Hydra Animagus was hardly discreet.

"**You should know your limitations, spawn of**..." the Archmage intended to kill her, a Light spell was hurled instinctively. But the deadly incantation spluttered at his feet. Calling Fate one more time after trying to bring down Judgement had emptied the Light well. There wasn't anything left for him to power his attacks.

"Archmage Ra," in the distance, Alexandra heard many people running, there were rumbles of reinforcements coming at last, non-magical flying machines and wizard teleporting near the battlefield. "Since you will never stop your atrocities, I suppose it falls to me to end your madness."

"**I am Archmage of the Light! Do you really think you can achieve** victory **where all your predecessors have failed, foolish girl**?"

Unfortunately, he was sort of right...no matter what she did try, there was no way to kill him conventionally. The problem about the Great Enemy had been revealed for the nonsense it was, but the fact remained she had not been able to kill him. The Phoenix Animagus powers offered him regeneration on a miraculous scale. Even with the Light at its weakest point in millennia, Alexandra was sure the 'Old Fossil' would survive...

But then that was never the plan.

The Light was both his greatest strength and his most terrible weakness...

Alexandra smiled, and suddenly, looking at her, the scribe-looking Avatar in the ruin of his white robes looked far less confident.

The Basilisk Slayer saluted with her sword...and then let the weapon stab the Venetian pavement.

Then using all her speed, Alexandra plunged her left hand into Ra's chest to grab his heart.

"**GAH**!" The treacherous not-Pharaoh screamed in pain. "**You think...it is going to be enough to kill me**?"

"**No**," the green-eyed witch replied coldly, "**but I don't intend to kill you. I am going to snap all the slavery bonds you ever forged to keep the Powers under your tyranny**."

The death of Myrddin had shown her the way. No more Light Powers, no more Archmage of the Light. It shouldn't have been possible here, but Ra had exhausted himself, and opened a door for the unthinkable.

"**No! No**!" Ra tried to struggle and fight, but his strength abandoned him. "**Don't do that! The Prophecy...if you do this, you will destroy this world! Without the Light, without me, you will have no chance against what is coming**!"

The Prophecy...ah, yes.

The Prophecy could get in line, or perish. Alexandra had stopped caring long ago.

"Come Day of Battle, O Angel of Death," Alexandra recited slowly, "Cast thy lightning and reign of the ashes. Ragnarok."

"**You see**?" Ra smiled. "**You need**-"

"FULMEN IMPERATOR!"

Alexandra Potter channelled all the lightning she had left in her hand...and then she used it to shred, tear apart, and cripple everything she could feel in the Archmage's heart.

Ra screamed louder than he ever had.

There was a loud...snapping sound, and suddenly, the Powers were cast away from the man who had destroyed entire civilisations.

The Light began to be expelled from his body, and as it did, the body of the ancient Avatar began to wither again, but this time, there was no regeneration to save him...and in this case, it was internal.

Ra tried to beg. Alexandra saw his mouth open in silent words.

The Potter Heiress turned away...and grabbed the broken Orichalcum sword.

"For the billions who died on the altar of the Light and your Eternal War."

Alexandra Potter moved, and her blade decapitated the Archmage.

And this time, the self-proclaimed Archmage of the Light didn't rise back.

**18 February 1995, Basilica di San Marco, Venice**

It was really dark in the Basilica, and Alexandra entered it alone.

The Potter Heiress had left Eleonora da Riva and Lyudmila Romanov to the Healers who had just arrived. Though to be honest, the Champion of Chaos was just unconscious and would likely wake up without their help. The Champion of Innocence, however...the breaking of the Light Powers must have been an excruciating torment for her. Eleonora would likely take days to recover. But she would live.

Still, the Slayer of the Archmage felt no triumph as she stepped through the entrance.

Ra had been too happy before she reminded him that deeds had consequences.

And the Prophecy was called 'Ragnarok', the Twilight of the Gods, not 'and they will kiss and live happily together until the end of days'.

Moreover, Alexandra wasn't naive enough to believe the near-powerless Power of Fate had the might to annihilate the Great Enemy anymore. Before Ra enslaved it, it would have already stretched credulity, but today? Not a chance in hell.

"How bad it is?" the Champion of the Morrigan didn't waste time dancing around the nightmare.

The King of the Exchequer...sighed.

And then he allowed her to see his right hand, temporarily removing the darkness effect of his Cloak.

The hand seemed pale at first glance...and then twisted, sickly light began to shine on its fingertips.

"By the..." Alexandra suddenly didn't have any insults or swearing to do it. "*The bastard sealed the Great Enemy into your body*?"

"**This is what I like about you, Champion of the Morrigan**," the Avatar of the Dark said in a conversational tone, as if the fate of this world was not at stake. "**You are young, but you know how to use your intelligence**."

Damn.

Damn.

"That's...this is...err..."

"**Stupid? Reckless? A last spiteful attempt of the Archmage to prove that Dark is evil and Light is Good? Yes. I would add many other colourful descriptions, but we don't have the time**."

Alexandra bared her teeth.

"He could have imprisoned Apophis into the Ark again instead of destroying it!"

"**Yes, he could have**." Osiris told her calmly, "**but I think it would have not proven more than a temporary solution. The Ark, or whatever it was at the beginning, was only built to imprison the *Khaibit*. Now that that the *Ka* and the *Ânkh* merged with it, the jail would have fatally weakened before breaking in mere years**."

"Everything would have still been better than to let it Possess you...he offered the Great Enemy his immortal soul along with the Avatar of the Dark!"

"**Ra has always been a short-sighted fool all his life, and this last battle was no exception**."

Well, Alexandra wasn't going to argue with *that*...

"Can you hold...can you keep the abomination from controlling you?"

"**It is taking most of my magic and my mental strength to speak with you and keep Apophis from anything important, be it using my magic, soul, or controlling my body**."

No wonder the King had not intervened against his brother...staying here was all he could do.

"**Victory**."

The word of command resonated in the Basilica for long seconds, and then one by one, mirrors activated.

There were dozens of them, and quite clearly, the Exchequer had found a way to replace them just after the time-freeze.

These were all the gates for the secret passages...and it was something more.

For at the end of the cathedral, magical stairs appeared out of nowhere too.

And they led to nowhere inside the cathedral, they were going up, up, towards...the Dark Sun?

Alexandra had no time to be surprised, for through the mirrors, the members of the Exchequer arrived.

Blue, white, brown, orange, red, and purple robed wizard and witches were answering the call, and leading them, in dark grey-black robes, was Morgane Rys'Ygraine Avalon.

"Your Majesty-"

"**The Dark Sun will not stay open for very much longer...my Queen**," the King of the Exchequer said rather gently for all his interruption. "**And I can't afford...this world can't handle the Great Enemy should it take control of my body. What must be done...is obvious**."

The King of the Exchequer uttered a word and snapped his fingers.

Instantly, reality...reality hummed. The Champion of Death had no better for word for it.

"**It is out of the question that the Enemy may influence and twist any of the Dark Powers, and thus I voluntary relinquish my position of Avatar. For three Powers, as they have no true Champion as we speak, I cast them out of the Dark and declare their vow fulfilled. Let them decide which Plane of Magic they want to be merged to**."

Holy...that...that meant the Dark Powers were going to be only two from now on, Chaos and Death?

A witch in red robes advanced, having donned a Chinese mask, stepped forwards. Alexandra knew immediately it was Knight Summoner the moment the first word was spoken.

"**My King, the Exchequer needs your guidance and**-"

The Ancient wizard – no longer an Avatar – raised his hand in a peaceful gesture.

"**Maybe we would be able to exorcise the Great Enemy out of my body, Knight Summoner. But it would be akin to unleashing something we have no counter for on this world, and Apophis has taken his *Ba* again. Once it was free, it would make it its first priority to find the three other parts of its soul and essence that are missing, and then...then we will all die. Yes, Knight Priest**?"

"The Dark Sun can win us some time, your Majesty," the white-robed wizard leading the column of...white-robed mages said after a reverence. "But for all its time-altering properties, it is a short respite. One year, or three, or seven. And...I'm not sure we can make sure it lasts seven years."

"**It will have to last for as long as possible**," the King imperiously told the Lord-level wizard. "**It will have to last...to give you time to slay the Great Enemy for good**."

And the last words were uttered as Osiris watched her.

Her. Not any Knight of the Exchequer...Her.

The King of the Exchequer handed two artefacts to Morgane...and given their appearance, those were certainly the Eye of Horus and the Uraeus of Ouadjet.

"**For the time being, a Queen will lead the Exchequer. Do as I would have done.**"

"Yes...my...yes, Lord Osiris."

"**Come forth, Champion of Death**."

Alexandra advanced...and knelt. For possibly the last time, it felt...necessary.

Unexplainably, as she did, her Cloak of Invisibility materialised in her hand.

"**What Death consented to, Death takes it back**," the King of the Exchequer removed his Cloak of Darkness, and then there was a...it was like a tornado of darkness...but which couldn't have lasted more than a blink of an eye.

When Alexandra touched her Cloak again, it had once again changed...and yet stayed the same.

"**The Shroud of Anubis and the Everlasting Cloak, together joined in Darkness and Death**..." the former Avatar spoke, "**I admit I didn't foresee this possibility when I created the Shroud. Use it well for the time it is given to you, Champion**."

"I...I will."

Osiris turned back and suddenly, he was at the base of the stairs.

"**I regret being there to not see this new age**," the millenary-old wizard said, "**it would have been quite a novel thing to watch**..."

His right foot touched the stairs, and the darkness seemed lacking, empty without his presence.

Many members of the Exchequer openly mourned or cried.

"**This is the last time I will speak to you, members of the Exchequer...do not make the mistakes I made. Do not let yourselves be consumed by the task ahead...celebrate the downfall of the Light...and stay united. You have done the impossible, and you can still accomplish great things**."

Not one more word was said, and Osiris began his ascent towards the Dark Sun, with each step he grew more indistinct, more fragile...and after a few minutes, Alexandra wasn't able to perceive him at all.

The stairs vanished soon after...and then the bells tolled.

It really, really didn't feel like a victory.

**18 February 1995, Plaza di San Marco, Venice**

Alexandra had entered the Basilica alone, and she left it alone.

The Exchequer wizards and witches apparently had better things to do than using conventional entrances, apparently.

The black-haired Champion breathed out and grimaced once she was in the plaza proper. Suddenly, her body was reminding her that no, she wasn't tireless. Hydra Animagus or not, there was a point where a Champion was exhausted, and the Ravenclaw girl had gone past that point hours ago.

Physically, mentally...everything was beginning to feel like an absolutely exhausting effort.

Which is why when Romeo Malatesti arrived before her, the Hogwarts Champion merely shrugged.

"You're about to say something which will give me the urge to slap you."

"I was just saying the Fourth Task could resume! Is it not one of my prerogatives as your Doge?"

Alexandra blinked...and then grinned.

"Morag, please slap him."

"By your will, Night Queen!"

SLAP!

"OUCH! Hey, careful! HELP! I am weak! I can't handle slaps!"

"Wasn't he supposed to be a big bad Champion?"

"I have a feeling he's not a Champion anymore..." Alexandra managed to make a poor attempt at giggling. "I have a clue or two about the why, but it will have to wait-"

"ALEX!"

The hug was...really, really good.

So was the kiss, to be honest.

"Hey, Susan."

"Do you have any idea how badly I was worried when watching you duel that monster? Do you know-"

"Wait a minute..." Alexandra shook her head. "What happened in the Plaza after the time-freeze...it was recorded?"

"Well, the Judges had prepared some surprises for the last days of the Fourth Task..." her girlfriend took a peevish expression. "You didn't know?"

"Err...no, no I didn't."

At least it explained why the King had waited for them inside the Basilica...fewer risks of being overheard.

"Is it...you're..."

"I'm..." the Champion of the Morrigan barely managed to keep her eyes open now, why was she so tired? Oh yes, so many battles..."I'm relieved everyone I care about is alive...but now I think I need...to rest."

Susan hugged her again...and Alexandra closed her eyes.

**Author's note**:

There will be two more chapters maximum at Venice, I think. We need to properly conclude the Fourth Task, and the end of the Statute will have a lot of consequences for the Tournament and Venice...

Still, the Arc of the Fourth Task and the Knight's Quest are over.

But while old challenges have been won...there is now a final battle waiting. Venice was only the beginning.

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