**Chapter 87**

**Dark Victories**

**5 November 1994, the Coliseum,** **Magical Republic of Venice**

The ancient Pharaoh stayed silent as the crowd of tens of thousands continued to loudly express its satisfaction at today’s events. Even with the sound-deafening wards around his private lodge, a conversation would not have been exactly practical.

It was only when the storm of shouts and cheers died down that Osiris finally spoke.

“**The outcome of the First task is more than acceptable for our plans**.” The Avatar of Darkness paused for a second before allowing a drop of irony to show in his voice. “**Though I confess the method was new**.”

“I suppose you’re referring to the...Leviathan throw, your Majesty?”

“**What else is worth mentioning, my Herald**?” the King of the Exchequer asked rhetorically. “**I’ve seen countless Empires rise and fall. I’ve watched as impregnable citadels were destroyed. I’ve personally killed hundreds of Champions, Light and Dark**.”

A smile formed on his lips.

“**But it’s the first time I’ve seen or heard one being killed by a combination involving a Levitation Charm...and a Leviathan**. **For the sake of my personal curiosity, did someone predict such an outcome**?”

“Err...no, no your Majesty. Or if someone did, it wasn’t one of ours.”

“**Interesting..**.”

“The First Seal has been activated according to the plan and avoided the scrying of the Light. We have two Styx Vipers at large.”

Osiris nodded discreetly. Since there was countless ways Fate could screw up a ritual at the last second, the Seals were *extremely* flexible rituals. The First Seal’s sole activation clause was the death of a Light or Dark Champion in the arena...or should he say, the first Champion’s death in the Coliseum. The Veela hybrid had been quite close to be the second, though it looked like she was going to live. Nevertheless, the nature of the creature created by a combination of Dark Alchemy and Creation Ritual entirely depended on who did the deed. Since it was the Champion of Death who had rid him of the Medici arrogant whelp, the Styx Viper was the ‘extinct species’ which was going to make its great return.

The King of the Exchequer wasn’t going to say the non-magical population of Egypt was lucky, because it would be a lie. On the other hand, these magical snakes were far from the worst thing they could have suddenly found themselves against. Styx Viper’s venom and their other predatory weapons killed *very* fast, after all.

“**I sense...disappointment in you, Herald**.”

“Maybe a little,” the Mongolian wizard admitted. “I still think we could have struck like the wind and activated two or three more Seals.”

“**We could have**,” the Keter-born monarch agreed. “**But then my dear brother and his band of lucky ‘heroes’ would have outright panicked from the very beginning, and when they panic, they are doing a lot of regrettable things and our spies have only begun to observe them. No, for this campaign precipitation is not a good idea. It’s better to let them dream that despite this defeat, they still have a chance to avoid the end of their world**.”

“Yes, your Majesty.” Knight Herald replied. “Now that we’ve seen the rather poor showing of the Light, I think the two main issues are-“

“**The Champion of Death and the Champion of Chaos, yes. Though we mustn’t underestimate the Light Champions who remain in the game...the French Veela is out of the competition for at least one Task, but she will come back. Their breed is...persistent that way. And I have a feeling the successor of Lorenzo de Medici will be chosen soon**.”

“With your permission, I will keep both eyes on the...story we want to write for the Second Task.”

“**Yes...make sure to keep the others, especially Knight Recruiter, informed if you find flaws in the actions which will lead to the activation of two more Seals**.”

“I will.”

The crowd cheered as the Leviathan’s tamers led the gigantic beast outside the arena, and the level of the artificial lake began to decrease at last. Knight Herald left his lodge.

And his Queen entered.

“**This is a battle you may not be able to win...Morgane**.”

At this hour, with no one listening, he wasn’t going to call her Isis.

“I am more thinking about guiding and moulding her into a proper Apprentice.” The younger, much younger witch replied. “Unless you oppose it?”

“**No...I just advise you to be careful. Death forged a sharp sword with that girl. We are more powerful, more knowledgeable, and more skilled in the art of surviving battles we shouldn’t have lost, but one blow is sometimes all it takes**.” The memory of the lightning spell striking everything in the arena was not going to be forgotten anytime soon. “**And the Morrigan’s Sword has a couple of dangerous blows in her**.”

“I won’t forget your advice. And today, I just intend to test the waters...in fact when it comes down to it, the Tournament itself is a prelude in that regard.”

“**It is. But what a prelude it is going to be...**”

**5 November 1994, Ministry of Magic, London**

It pained him to think about it, but Rufus Scrimgeour was forced to acknowledge he had underestimated how stupid Cornelius Fudge was. Once upon a time – several weeks ago, in other words – Rufus had believed the moron was as incompetent as the average politician and with the proportional intelligence going with it.

He had been wrong. Fudge was decided to prove he served to be crowned ‘King of the Imbeciles’ or a similar dignity.

“We must arrest this murderess immediately!”

Okay, it was time to end it, it had stopped being funny.

“No.”

The Minister’s face reddened immediately.

“What do you mean, no? I gave you an order, Director!”

“And I say ‘no’...*Minister*.” Rufus threw as much insult as he could in this single title. “Your Ministry – and therefore the DMLE – gave full immunity to the Champions who were selected to participate in the European Magical Tournament. The moment the ICW realises we intend to violate the treaties we signed months ago, we will be lucky if *only* half of the continent does declare war against us...assuming they don’t prefer an economic blockade and making us international pariahs.”

“But this girl...this Dark Lady...she killed upstanding citizens!”

Scrimgeour gave him an unimpressed look.

“We have nothing allowing us to prove Lady Alexandra Potter killed the Death Eaters...who are anything but upstanding citizens, Minister.” Seriously, Rufus was more and more tempted to kill Fudge here and there, and damn the consequences for his career. No replacement could be as idiotic, right? Right?

“Oh please, Director! You are going to tell me there is another Dark Lady living in the British Isles who has mastered two rare Dark elemental spells?”

“I’m not saying that.” The grey-haired wizard replied as calmly as he could. “I said we had no proof! Albus Dumbledore mentioned her name weeks ago, so we checked if the Potter Heiress was seen during the final of the Quidditch World Cup. She wasn’t. We have no witnesses, no one was able to examine her wand, and the two spells, while rare, are not impossible to cast if you are a powerful witch or wizard. And since we have no proof, the ICW and every country in Europe would be prompt to inflict painful retribution since the appearances would suggest we break every international treaty we aren’t satisfied with for the flimsiest reasons!”

“Ridiculous! Surely the fact she is a Dark Lady would warrant her immediate arrest!”

Merlin’s pants, eliminating the moron would really be doing the world a favour...

“And who is going to arrest her?” Scrimgeour didn’t add ‘imbecile’ with a formidable effort of will. “Judging by the performance shown into the arena, there are not enough Aurors in Ministry service to fight Alexandra Potter to a standstill.”

In fact, it was probable that if they mustered every Ministry employee in a single location, including Aurors, Hit-Wizards and other specific personnel like the Unspeakables, they would not be able to survive the sort of war spells the Basilisk-Slayer routinely used to destroy her enemies.

Rufus had seen the apocalyptic lightning devastate everything via the enchanted mirror installed in the Ministry atrium. For the first time in years, he had really been terrified and unable to convince himself he could have found a way to survive if it had been him in this water-filled arena.

“Then we seize her vaults and force her to come to us!”

“First, the goblins won’t let us seize the Potter vaults without a Wizengamot vote. It is very possible they won’t let us seize them at all in the end, really. They liked her better than us before this Tournament Task; after it, they’re going to think about it, and arrive to the same conclusion most of my men already did: it’s far less dangerous to antagonise the Ministry than to anger Alexandra Potter.”

“Dumbledore! We have Dumbledore!”

Fudge really was trying to sink to new levels in the hope of saving his skin...it would be quite impressive if it wasn’t such a nauseating thing to watch him.

Still, the King of Imbeciles had a point. Albus Dumbledore was likely powerful enough to challenge Alexandra Potter. And impartially, Rufus was ready to acknowledge the Headmaster of Hogwarts would have a massive advantage in terms of experience and magic studies; as it should be since one was a century-old wizard and the other was a teenage witch not having passed her OWLs yet.

The problem was that given the display of violence in the arena, the DMLE Director was far from sure the Basilisk-Slayer would give him the time to exploit his formidable resources of magical lore. Not to mention that in the arena, the veteran Auror had noticed the Champions were limited to one focus and standard protections. These ‘Tournament Tasks’ had rules. What would happen when there weren’t any, given that Alexandra Potter had chosen to levitate a Leviathan and throw it at her opponents when the fighting options were severely limited?

“Minister, with my deepest respect...stop having ideas, please.”

**5 November 1994, the Coliseum,** **Magical Republic of Venice**

As one could likely imagine, the Scuola Regina organisers had not agreed to something humble and limited for the ceremony which would officially end the First Task of the Tournament. A few minutes after having gone to dress into her school uniform, the Champions were greeted by a musical orchestra playing in the now redecorated arena.

And redecorated was the appropriate word. Several marble columns in a very Greek style had been added, the musicians were playing on a sort of miniature scene reminding her of photos of Antiquity theatres, and many ornamental plants and flowers had been brought into the Coliseum.

If someone hadn’t watched the First Task, it wouldn’t have been difficult to make him believe there had been no Champions killing each other one hour ago.

“Your Headmistress went for the golden podium,” Lucrezia Sforza commented behind her.

“My mother doesn’t know the meaning of small ceremonies,” the young Succubus sniffed haughtily as they descended white stairs which had definitely not been there during the Trial. “At least we’re only six to be congratulated; otherwise we would still be there until midnight...”

Lucrezia Sforza had definitely a point. Before taking position before the judges, they were ‘presented’ to the crowd by walking half of the stadium’s length.

And yes, they were only six to be ‘invited’ in the arena, the six wizards and witches who had successfully retrieved the ‘Tournament Clue’ during the First task. The others? They waited in the stands, the infirmary wing...or the morgue. The message sent wasn’t exactly subtle: win and you are rewarded; lose and you fall into nonexistence.

“Champions, bring forwards your Tournament Clues!”

Small hovering silver trays flew from all directions to finally stop before them. Alexandra posed the golden cup on the one facing her, and before she could do more than blinking, what looked like a very old-fashioned sealed container for papyrus rolls appeared into a flash of white light.

A glance on her left gave the Potter Heiress the confirmation that the same thing had happened for the other five Champions.

“These objects will be your sole and only source of information as to the nature of the Second Task,” Mohammed ben Qassim explained courteously. “And to prevent thievery attempts or some...creative interpretations of the rules, I formally inform you that you have all been given the same...documentation, shall we say? Moreover, the information had been enchanted so that only someone having your magical signature can read or inflict damage upon it.”

“Do we have to find out where the Second Task will take place?” the Beauxbatons Champion asked.

“No, no!” The Moroccan Judge chuckled. “That isn’t something included in your research. The Second Task will take place right where you stand, on the third of December.”

So they had a bit less than a month to prepare themselves for the next trial of the Tournament. It was both long...and short. The wizard official had not said this was going to be straightforward clues, just that this was their only source of information. Minor consolation, they wouldn’t have a problem finding their way to the arena or be afraid of missing the day of the Task...

“And now for the reward ceremony!”

The crowd burst into sonorous applause, the sheer amount of voices shouting and clapping feeling like a gigantic storm. Countless wizards and witches, some of them Ministers or other prestigious politicians and figures of Europe walked out via the gladiator entrances.

The music of the orchestra grew more triumphant.

“In sixth place, representing the Scuola Regina, seventy points, Romeo Malatesti!”

The Champion of War, needless to say, wasn’t at all happy to be reminded five Champions had beaten him. His behaviour was impeccable when the officials and the Judge shook his hand, but everyone could see he was...very disappointed.

Alexandra did her best to not smile at his discomfiture. There were six more Tasks, and the Stymphalian Bird Animagus – Morag had managed to whisper this interesting piece of news to her – was not out of the competition. Hells, in theory even those who would replace the dead Champions could still win the Tournament: there still were six hundred points to win.

Anyway, Romeo Malatesti received a bouquet of red flowers, three books on magical creatures, what looked to be a ticket for a week-end in an aquatic park or something like that.

“In fifth place, representing the Scuola Regina, seventy-nine points, Eleonora da Riva!”

The brown-haired witch was far happier than her Dark counterpart when she stepped forwards, no doubt about it. She even kissed the poor official who brought her the bouquet of flowers...pretty audacious for the Champion of Innocence.

Incidentally, this was the second Champion of the Scuola Regina to be rewarded, and there was a third waiting for later. The host school had really demolished them during this First Task, and if what Morag had the time to whisper was true, it was likely the gap was going to widen, not narrow...thank the Morrigan her motivation wasn’t to win the school competition.

The rewards given to the Light Champion of Innocence were pretty much the same given to Malatesti, save that Eleonora received four books instead of three, and a sort of expensive hat in...was it Griffin feathers? Damn, the judges had really a weird sense of humour...

“In fourth place, representing the Académie de Magie Beauxbatons, eighty-four points, Henri de Condé!”

The cheers from the crowd were more moderate, though the stands filled with the students of the French school of course manifested their joy. The Venetian and international spectators shouted and applauded louder as the boy smiled and waved to the crowd.

In addition to the usual rewards of the two previous Champions, the blonde-haired boy was the brand-new owner of a cape in true Chimera leather.

“In third place, representing the Scuola Regina, ninety points, Lucrezia Sforza!”

Everyone, including the judges, had to use Occlumency or some variant of it as the Champion of Desire flashed the entire arena with her aura. Add to the fact that while she had taken more conservative clothes, Lucrezia Sforza was still showing more bare flesh than the other five Champions together, and well...ahem, no comments.

The Succubus jumped on the podium, and the acclamation of the crowd was...*intense*.

It was night and day between the Venetian witch and the three who had come before.

The same was true for the rewards. This time there were not three or four books, but outright two collections of Magical Creatures studies, which was...err...approximately thirty books. There was a card to give access for a period of one year to some of the best restaurants of Venetia and Italy...at least for the magical side, she presumed. There were several enchanted items, cloak, gloves, boots, wand holster and robes.

And obviously, when a red pillow came forwards with an enchanted diadem of bronze, it was the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina, Lucrezia’s mother, who placed it upon her head.

“In second place, representing the Durmstrang Institute, ninety-two points, Lyudmila Romanov!”

This time there was no way to not notice the cheers and the applause were far less powerful. Hard to blame them, really. The enchanting mirrors focused on the Dark Queen showed perfectly her expression, and it could be best described as *carnivorous*.

It went without saying that having four points of advance after the First Task was good, but hardly something very comfortable...

Crazy or not crazy – though the Durmstrang witch was the former – the rewards were not inferior to those received by Sforza. After she climbed on the second place of the podium, Romanov had the restaurant boon, *three* collections of books, one painting, plenty of enchanted clothes, a necklace with several precious stones which was the real deal, and several other trinkets and invitations for activities across Venetia. And she got a silver diadem too.

“Winner, representing Hogwarts, ninety-six points, Alexandra Potter!”

Alexandra had just the time to jump on the podium that the crowd thundered in applause and it almost made her deaf for the next minute.

The cheers, the clapping, the voices acclaiming her...it was maybe a bit *too much*, seriously.

As if one had heard her thoughts, the officials began to pile up the rewards.

First, there were the one thousand and five hundred Galleons. One thousand because she had won the First Task, and five hundred because she was the leader of the rankings.

Second, the Magical Creatures’ collections. The green-eyed Champion could build a library with them alone, since she received five of them...none of them were British, by the way. And she was likely going to have to learn new languages because she didn’t speak German...or Arabic.

The restaurant invitations, the enchanted clothes, and several other things the two Champions on her right and left of the podium had received were given to her too.

All of this attention somehow vanished from her mind when Alexandra recognised the person who was advancing next.

It was the Queen of the Exchequer. It was Morgana La Fay...or Morgane Rys’Ygraine Avalon, she supposed.

The glamour the Dark Lady was using was impressive, and if the basilisk-Slayer hadn’t met her before, she would have thought it was just an old Dark Witch hiding her fading beauty from the crowds. But as it was, the immensely powerful vampire had used it to temporarily vanishing the scars left by Excalibur away from prying gazes.

“You have fulfilled the letter and the spirit of our agreement,” the millennium-old – and more - Vampiri Romani murmured as she stood before the podium. Her next words were destined to all other. “Congratulations for your victory. Receive this present in sign of my gratitude.”

Alexandra stopped breathing for a second, because while she had received jewellery before, the emerald-covered necklace in the shape of a flower which was waiting for her hands on the ‘victory pillow’ was just something....unique. There were so many emeralds...and they were so big! And they were enchanted these emeralds...seriously, even the Exchequer must have broken the piggy bank to commission this artwork of jewellery...

Her fingers touched the emeralds with reverence...and inside her mind, Alexandra received flashes of memories which weren’t hers. Flashes of lands where she had never stepped a foot...suddenly the Potter Heiress was contemplating a villa from the sky like she was a bird...was it a villa? It was so large it made Zabini Manor like a non-ambitious project.

A name was uttered in the visions.

*Alexandria*

And when the visions at last ended, Alexandra was confident that the necklace, for all its magnificence, was just the...disguise of something the Exchequer wouldn’t have offered to Lyudmila Romanov if she had won the First Task. It was the symbol of ownership – and maybe the key to the wards – of this Egyptian equivalent of a Noble House’s manor.

“I...I...”

“Something to think about, before your next exploits,” the Queen of the Exchequer mused, before turning away.

Alexandra stayed in this astonished state for a few seconds, before a new person walked to take Morgana’s place...and this one would have been recognised with or without glamour...

“Mother...”

“I was always proud of you, but today, your surpassed my expectations.” Lily Potter said gently. “The golden laurels of the First Task are for you.”

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Enchanted mirrors or not, objects magnifying the eyesight or not, Albus would have recognised the green-eyed vampire who posed the Roman-style laurels upon the head of the Ravenclaw Champion. Lily Potter had always been a beautiful woman when she was alive, and though undeath had transformed her into something incredibly evil, there remained enough of her looks for someone who had seen her countless times to put a name on her face immediately.

Albus sighed. That was the fate of James Potter, then. And likely poor Remus. Several minor Seers of the Army of Light had delivered warnings about green eyes of a shade of the Killing Curse, and the Champion currently raising her hands in victory and saluting the crowd was at the top of his list of suspects...but as this presentation proved, she was hardly the only one to have green eyes.

This was bad...and Albus feared the worst was yet to come. The former Supreme Mugwump didn’t doubt that the vampire dearly wanted to crown the daughter she had given birth to before becoming a creature of the night; blood was the only thing the bloodsuckers understood, and having your blood lineage win in this Tournament was not a small feat. But this couldn’t be the only reason. Not when seconds ago, another official presenting the victor’s gift had been an older vampire...and one radiating so much Dark magic it was really quite san effort to not draw his wand and cast any offensive spell.

No, there must have been plenty of reasons beyond the familial pride for those two vampires to break their anonymity. And one the Headmaster of Hogwarts worried about all was that everything the Light could do anymore wasn’t threatening for them anymore.

“Headmaster,” a familiar voice arrived to his ears.

“Ah, Neville,” the young Longbottom seemed...anxious. As much Albus was not going to admit it out loud, there were a lot of reasons to be. “I thought you were going to go congratulate Champion Hooper?”

“I’m going to after this conversation,” the Boy-Who-Lived promised before grimacing visibly. “Is it wrong of me to be very glad he is the Gryffindor Champion and is the first to face the dangers of the Tournament?”

“I wouldn’t say it is wrong...merely human,” the Defeater of Grindelwald replied slowly while caressing his beard. “And there were many good reasons to not want to step into this arena, especially for the Water Trial.”

Albus didn’t believe for a second the so-called ‘random sorting’ had been truly random...and the bad news was that the alternative would have been likely extremely unpleasant. The Lord of Magic could picture all too clearly what would have happened if Karkaroff’s favourite psychopath had been unleashed against the Champions of Hufflepuff or Gryffindor. As much as he didn’t like it, the daughter of Lily Potter was the only Hogwarts Champion with the raw power to survive and thrive in this kind of environment.

“Thank you,” the boy who had vanquished Tom Riddle said quietly. “I have several questions...about today.”

“I’m all ears.” Dumbledore assured him.

“The first...I saw the spells Alexandra Potter used...the Daily Prophet mentioned they had been used at the World Cup by someone who killed the Death Eaters. Is she...”

Albus Dumbledore nodded. It had taken some minutes for him to clear his mind and recognise it...too many astonishing things in too little time...but once he did, there wasn’t any doubt about it.

“Yes, Alexandra Potter is almost certainly the witch who extinguished House Yaxley and ruined Voldemort’s plans at the World Cup. I don’t know how she was informed so fast that there was something wrong at the Quidditch Cup, but there is a very high possibility she did it. We both know that she is a Black Witch, but her sympathies do not lay with the Death Eaters.”

Or she had a disturbing way to show it, the Hogwarts Headmaster mused. Houses Yaxley and Rosier were extinct by her actions, and the number of Death Eaters killed must already be over...well, he didn’t know how long her murder list was. But the followers of Tom Riddle should really shake in their shoes after today’s power display.

“Err...won’t the Ministry be...furious?”

“Furious? Yes, probably. But it isn’t like it changes something, Neville. Using dangerous spells during the Tournament is hardly proof you did it somewhere else before...though it is rubbing our noses in our powerlessness, I will admit.”

And Fudge...Merlin’s socks, he was going to have to check with London after this ceremony. It was better to verify the idiot had not done something stupid and internationally disrespectful.

“That answers my question...I guess. And another thing...I felt an enormous magic release when Lorenzo died. Was it something...significant?”

“It was,” Albus sighed, something which happened to him too frequently this last couple of weeks. “It was. Unless I am completely wrong, this was the first step of the Enemy’s grand plan.”

“And it was done by Death.”

“For once I will try to be fair and say it didn’t matter a lot,” Neville looked at him with a very surprised face. “I am not going to say I am unhappy at the outcome of this Task, because it is not the case.” Albus Dumbledore commented calmly. “But the moment four Champions, two of the Light, two of the Dark, all having excellent reasons to hate each other, jumped into the same arena with no reason to spare their respective lives, one was most likely going to die. The Great Darkness made sure of that.”

“This is...frightening.”

“It is.” The former Grand Sorcerer declared before apologising “I’m afraid I am not really able to give very comforting advice this afternoon, Neville.”

No, there was no comfort at all. The mind behind this Tournament had carefully planned the First Task so that the Seal was activated, and not telling anyone what it was about had not prevented the disaster. With this first example in mind, Albus had the bad feeling the same disaster could be repeated twelve more times.

And if it did...

The silver-bearded sorcerer shivered. It was a really bad situation, and there was no escape in sight...

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Alexandra had heard and said herself many expressions about time, but it was the first instance of the great wheel governing the life of all beings truly slowing down noticeably.

Her feet slowed down no matter the energy she used to accelerate her walking pace.

Time wasn’t exactly stopped as she and the other Champions began to leave the arena after the ceremony of rewards. The Ravenclaw Champion could still move, but the whole world seemed suddenly...greyish, and it was most difficult to breathe.

To say the Morrigan’s Champion would have been surprised by the appearance of the Queen of the Exchequer next to her would stretch the truth.

“The King appreciates you gave a painful lesson to the Champion of Chaos,” the redoubtable Dark Witch declared without wasting her time in pleasantries.

“Thank you...I guess.” Alexandra’s control was good enough to not turn back to see if Loki’s Champion was watching her right now. “I think she’s going to be more dangerous for the next Tasks. Now that I have proven that she’s not invincible and that a lot of her failures stemmed from her arrogance, Lyudmila is going to study what went wrong for her and come back stronger.”

The fact Morgane Rys’Ygraine Avalon didn’t answer her analysis of the Dark Queen’s possible reactions wasn’t exactly of a nature to reassure her.

Since the Queen of the Exchequer didn’t speak, Alexandra voiced the question she had been thinking about for the duration of the podium and all frivolities.

“Why all these plans in the shadows? You could easily conquer half of the world with half of the money you threw in this Tournament!”

“Fate,” the dangerous witch-vampire answered without hesitation. “The overwhelming reason to most of our organisation and my actions is Fate. As unlikely as the victory is for the Light, they will always have it if there is the slightest possibility of success. Everything that can go wrong will turn wrong if it is done by wizards or witches sworn to the Dark. Camlann and thousands of other battles taught us this painful lesson until we were sick of it.”

Mordred’s mother waved her hand and images of battle and cataclysms danced in the fog around them.

“Several times we based our rituals on the moon or the cycle of the planets, only for the moon or the astral cycles to be altered violently. Animals destined to be sacrificed on the altars fell dead without apparent reason. Armies which were thousands of leagues away managed somehow to arrive in time and engage us in battle after deeds which should have seen them die of exhaustion. Terrible artefacts imbued with the Light Powers’ strength were forged in mere days when the first stages of it would have taken a Dark Master several years. Potential Dark Champions were slaughtered in the crib before they could hold a magical focus.”

“**Truth**,” the Morrigan whispered in her ear.

“That still doesn’t explain to me why you think this Tournament is going to change the status quo,” Alexandra said slowly. “I mean, the rituals were done by your ritual practitioners, and while I may be responsible for the final activation, you did everything else, including throwing the Champions of the Light and the Dark against each other...not that the Army of Light fanatics needed much encouragement.”

To her credit, the Queen of the Exchequer didn’t bother denying her culpability in the entire affair.

“The activation is a core element and we didn’t give any orders...or knowledge...you were to kill each other. What you did, you did on your own. Therefore it was your decision to activate the First Seal, and your magic will attune...the ritual.”

“You’re not serious.” The green-eyed Champion of Death said aghast. She had used a lot of her magic to kill Lorenzo de Medici and deal with the others, and of course her magic was carrying a strong death-fuelled influence whatever she did, since her mastery to separate the flow of power wasn’t that great. The thought of all this magic altering, fuelling, and empowering the ritual...there were a lot of words to describe it, and most of them were insults.

The emotionless expression she received in return was answer enough. Yes, the Exchequer’s commanding Lords and Ladies were very serious about their intentions.

“And what did your...Seal...was supposed to do, once activated?”

“It created the first of a new generation of Styx Vipers.”

“Tell me that...” no, it wasn’t a joke, of course not! “There are rumours Herpo the Foul used Styx Viper’s essence to create the Basilisk species.”

“In this case, the rumour is perfectly accurate,” the witch remembered as Morgana La Fay replied with a predatory smile. “He was tempted to use Hydra’s essence too, because for some reason, the regeneration of the Styx Viper wasn’t transmitted perfectly to his creation, but he died before meeting success.”

Alexandra had the urge to ask how the Lady Vampire could know that, but it was obvious in hindsight. Herpo had to be a member of the Exchequer.

And she didn’t forget the mention of the Hydra. It could have been innocent, but staring in the green eyes of the Dark Lady, that Morgane Rys’Ygraine Avalon knew which animal she could turn into was a certainty.

“What makes you so sure that you will be able to control a XXXXX-class threat which was nicknamed ‘Spawn of Apophis’ while they weren’t an endangered species?” It was a designation which was perfectly deserved. The adult Styx Vipers were incredibly long-lived – the books she had read mentioned several centuries of life expectancy – and they could grow to half of the size of the Hogwarts Basilisks. Granted, their eyes couldn’t kill, but their venom was as potent as their hybrid descendants...and unlike the Basilisks, they had the magical skill to breathe it in a dragon-like manner.

If the Queen of the Exchequer was saying the truth – and there was no reason for her to joke about such a grave matter – the average wizard was screwed when trying to go against a monster like that, and the less said about the non-magical population, the better.

“We have placed restrictions in the ritual which will limit their numbers for millennia.” The vampire’s lips didn’t reveal how ‘low’ said number was, and Alexandra had a feeling it was going to be far too high. “As to the issue of controlling them...I am one of the reasons they will obey.”

Alexandra raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“You aren’t the Champion of Death anymore.”

“But I am a Styx Viper Animagus.”

Oh, dark breath of Sauron...really? It wasn’t enough for the Queen to be a near-invincible vampire, she had also gained a XXXXX-class Animagus form...seriously, she thought her Hydra core was supposed to be unique, not that it was handed to every Champion who desired it...

“One of your goals is to cull the non-magical population.” It was the only thing which made sense.

The Dark Lady smiled before readjusting her simple dark grey robe and beginning to walk away as the effects of the time-alteration began to fade.

“Think about my proposal...Apprentice. The gates of the Great Library will be opened to you if you accept.”

**5 November 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

There had been plenty of smiles during the reward ceremony and the photo sessions, but not any longer. It was somehow reassuring, because for several hours, Albus had been worried the Judges were willing to close their eyes upon the fact so many Champions had died.

“There will be an official ceremony for the promising wizards who have fallen,” it was difficult if the Beast-Tamer was sincere or not. “Before it, I present my condolences to the three schools which have lost a Champion today.”

There were no murmurs or any other sound of voice, even Karkaroff had the good sense to keep a false mournful expression on his face.

For several minutes, short eulogies and regretful speeches were made by several politicians, the organisers, and the Judges in the ‘Hall of Memories’ of the Scuola Regina, a middle-sized room which sweated death and regret, as everything was draped in immense black curtains, black veils, and black symbols of funeral.

The sun was beginning to set when the ceremony to the dead ended, and Dumbledore could only hope that in the next month, he wouldn’t be forced to hear condolences for another Champion of Hogwarts. Unfortunately, with how dangerous the First Task had proven, how bloodthirsty the competition was, and how unprepared some substitutes were...the silver-bearded Headmaster was less than confident of the survival of his students than he had been this very morning.

The four School Heads were led to a more multicoloured but still solemn hall where refreshments waited for them...as well as several decisions.

“While I know it might seem disrespectful for the dead,” the Potion Master among the Judges began with a tone adapted to the circumstances, “the rules are strict and clear: we need sixteen Champions for the Second Task, and right now, we lack four to reach this number. In addition to the deaths of Champion De Medici, Warrington, and Karamnov, Champion Delacour has been evacuated to the San Giorgio Hospital as the gravity of her injuries required more than the excellent equipment placed at the disposal of the senior Healers invited for the Tournament. To avoid accusations of partiality, the substitutes you will choose must be officially confirmed as fast as magically possible.”

“Partiality?” Igor Karkaroff intervened. “I would have thought that without any clues or points, these substitutes are going to be at a massive disadvantage no matter happens.”

“We do not forbid the successful Champions to give their schoolmates critical information, High Master Karkaroff,” the dark-skinned South American witch present was prompt to give him a firm rebuke. “If your student...Champion Lyudmila Romanov...refuses to reveal the clue of the Second Task to the other three Durmstrang Champions, that’s her problem and yours, not ours.”

The former Death Eater closed his mouth quickly, and perhaps this was his imagination, but the Defeater of Grindelwald swore he was gritting his teeth.

The Judges didn’t even have to underline the fact that since there were six Champions who were successful, the First Task had not been impossible and not obtaining the ‘Tournament Clue’ was due to the unpreparedness of the boys and girls who had failed.

“Please Headmasters and Headmistresses, your choice of new Champions for the Second Task.”

“I nominate Champion-substitute Giovanni Ruspoli to replace Champion Lorenzo de Medici,” Angelica Sforza began in a soft voice, dark and lethal beauty in a dark robe which was far too elegant and eye-catching to be worn at a funeral....unless the funeral was those of an enemy. And since her fallen student had been a Light Champion, it was.

“The Académie de Beauxbatons affirms Champion-substitute Armand Coularé de Lafontaine will be a worthwhile Champion to replace Champion Fleur Delacour for as long as she is unable to compete.” Headmistress Olympe Maxime affirmed in a tenser voice. Her black robes, unlike the Succubus were truly the kind of things one wore for mourning...though there were some stripes which indicated there was still hope for her female Champion.

“Champion-substitute Boris Viipuri replaces Champion Pyotr Karamnov,” the Durmstrang Headmaster half-barked. ‘And may he do a better job than him’ was not uttered, but everyone heard it nonetheless.

This left him as the sole Head of school...yet to speak. The temptation was strong to place a Gryffindor or at least a substitute who wasn’t going to embarrass him in this Tournament. But if he did that, he would breach over twenty informal accords he had made with his Heads of House...no, it was better to accept the...risks.

“Per the rankings and the order of the substitutes agreed during the Hogwarts preliminaries, Champion-substitute Graham Montague is called to replace the tragic death of Champion Cassius Warrington.”

Albus would just have to hope the young Montague would have learned all the lessons of his partner-in-crime’s bloody demise. Sadly, if the academic performances of the two Slytherins after the Chamber of Secrets incident were any indication, the pureblood boys of their mould needed to be smacked a long time for the lesson finally to arrive into their thick skulls...

**5 November 1994, San Giorgio Hospital of Hospital, Torcello Island, Magical Republic of Venice**

The first sight Fleur had when she woke up was a nice, yellow-white ceiling.

At first, the Delacour Heiress thought she was dreaming. It had to be a dream, right? Everything she had worried about, the First Task of the Tournament, the elimination of Black Witches...everything had been a dream.

Then a part of her brain whispered that the villa which was loaned to her in this corrupted Venetian school had no yellow-white ceiling...or walls.

But she wasn’t in pain...she didn’t even feel her muscles and her body...surely that had to be a dream.

It was only when she managed to turn her head – and it was astonishingly irritating for some reason – that the Champion of Life realised with horror her arms, her chest...everything she could see was covered in bandages and most of them were covered with Healing Runes or smelling the familiar odour of powerful Healing Philtres and Potions.

Merciful Archangels, it wasn’t a dream...and suddenly the flash of a memory resurfaced. A lone dark figure, surrounded by ethereal green flames beyond a veil...and an impossible storm of lightning bolts disintegrating her world.

Seconds were spent immobile...and then before she tried to move to see how extensive the bandages were – with only those she saw, Fleur knew she had to look like a mummy – several wizards and witches dressed in green Healer robes entered the room. And they were followed by her father.

“Ah, Miss Delacour, you have woken up,” one of the wizards began, his skin as dark as ebony and his wand pouring white-coloured magic in her, which gave her some comforting sensation everywhere. Fleur tried to speak, but only an unintelligible moan escaped her lips. “Please don’t try to talk, the Philtres we have given you must be given several hours to heal your throat and the same applies to the Recovery Potions. You have only been unconscious for four hours, the Healing process needs more time to be completed.”

There were more words, mention how she was safe in the ‘San Giorgio Hospital’ or something of the sort. There were plenty of assurances she was going to be able to walk and continue practising magic after a long period of rest.

Finally, the Healers left, with the promise they would return in thirty minutes with a Dreamless Potion and other Pain-removal ‘gifts’.

And the Champion of the Army of Light found herself facing Armand Delacour, Minister of France...who also happened to be her father.

“I wonder when I failed as your father.” He started in a disappointed voice. “I thought I was raising beautiful, kind daughters. I thought you would try to pursue careers in the magical fields you grew to love at Beauxbatons. I thought I could be proud of you for your academic achievements and your willingness to learn complex and ancient spells.”

The eyes weren’t accusatory...they were...they were filled with infinite sadness.

“And today I saw my eldest daughter challenge another Champion, one who despite being far younger, was far too strong for her to have any chance of victory. I saw her physically destroyed, brought to the edge of death...and using the favours I should have asked for weeks ago, I discovered this had to be the second time you faced her, not the first.”

Fleur felt her eyes widen imperceptibly. Light and Sword, this was-

“Yes, after such an evident suicidal behaviour, I convinced some old friends to speak to old friends who knew the truth...and of course de Broglie was perfectly happy to tell me what had really happened during the Battle of Hogsmeade...and who fought against whom there.”

Armand Delacour paused and his mouth twisted in disgust.

“Setting aside what madness seized you to attack a defenceless village where dozens of students were minding their own business, I would have thought the slaughter of virtually your entire party would have told you there are magical practitioners it is best not to anger.”

Fleur didn’t say anything...not because she couldn’t – though it was a factor – but she wouldn’t have if she was able to either.

“Do you know how much you made your little sister cry? Do you know how much your mother and I were afraid for your life? You nearly died, Fleur! We saw you get electrocuted and burned to a horrible degree before the arena’s handlers saved you and the Healers threw enough Healing magic for an entire hospital! What would we, your parents, have said to Gabrielle if this emergency medical assistance was insufficient?”

Fleur lowered her head as much as she could...all the better not to look at her father’s eyes.

“I thought I had given you several times a fair explanation how powerful and skilled you were and what was the correct approach when facing Lady-level opponents. Evidently, you either didn’t listen or you forgot it the moment your ‘friends’ of the Army of Light whispered stupidities into your ears.”

The Veela-blooded witch flinched.

“At the light of what happened during the First Task of the Tournament, I have decided to send a lot of paperwork I didn’t believe I would ever have the opportunity to fill. Obviously, despite being seventeen, you are not mature enough to be trusted with important decisions governing your life. The moment the Healers declare your recovery can be done outside of this hospital, I am bringing you home. I don’t care how many favours I will have to burn, but it is out of the question to leave you on your own. You are the target for the manipulations of an organisation which is ready to let you fight Lady-level Champions, and I won’t tolerate it.”

But what about-

“I won’t withdraw you from the Tournament.” Her father continued. “For all the reality I am the Minister of France and you are my precious eldest daughter, the financial penalties are too massive to be paid on a mere whim. Moreover, Madame Maxime assured me you were declared inapt to compete in the Second Task a few minutes ago, and I have the full support of the healing staff that your injuries are far too severe to risk anything physically strenuous before February at best. Hopefully by the time you have recovered, the European Magical Tournament will be over.”

No, it wouldn’t. The heretics of the Dark weren’t going to forget her existence...

Her father shook his head.

“What were you thinking, Fleur?” The same question, which brought tears to her eyes. “You were ready to ruin your health, ruin your life, to kill someone who not only never hurt you personally before last year, but is also capable of levitating a sea snake to crush a Champion. Do you care for your life so little? Don’t you care for your little sister at all?”

This was unfair. Of course, she cared about Gabrielle! Of course she-

“I ask, because if the answer to these questions is ‘yes, I care about my family’, you have a horrifying way to show it to us.” The Minister-father sighed in disappointment. “We will speak more about the consequences of your unreasonable actions when you will have recovered and-“

The door opened again, and Fleur almost gasped as it wasn’t a Healer, it was-

“Get out,” her father growled.

“Minister Delacour, I have-“

“This is a private healing room, and I didn’t invite you for visits, *Archmage*. Now get out, before I call the hospital security teams.”

“There is no need, I came to help and-“

“The best way you can help my daughter is by staying more than one hundred kilometres away from her for the rest of her life. I think you have done enough damage, *Archmage*. I will be thankful in the name of the Delacour family if I didn’t have to speak to you for a few more centuries. I wish you a good evening. *Archmage*.”

And the door was closed magically before Ra could add one more word.

**5 November 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

Obviously, the evening party after the First Task was something royally beautiful and hellishly expensive. Obviously. It went from the southern edge of the Scuola Regina gardens to the northernmost halls inside the school...and it had the number of wizards and magical people to justify spreading the celebrations over such a massive area.

It was a massive succession of firework, buffets, dancing themes, and more things that were both familiar and unfamiliar with a neat Roman Empire theme, and Alexandra felt uncomfortable.

Not because she was in clothes which were out of the line; her guardian had found a black robe which was as fashionable as its probable price was high.

No, the source of her discomfort was when she realised how many Light and Dark magical beings were present inside the Venetian magical school’s boundaries. It was like half of Europe’s Dark Wizards had decided to attend...and half of the Light Wizards too.

Alexandra was finishing eating a miniature pizza – hey, they were in the Italian peninsula – after answering the questions of a dozen journalists from Italy and France when a Venetian student arrived and bent the knee without any compulsion before doing a hand kiss the old-fashioned way.

“Thank you Champion Potter! I thank you with all my heart!”

“Err...” Alexandra cleared her throat. “You’re welcome, Mister...?”

“Cicerone de Medici, new Heir of House de Medici! Thank you very much for killing my cousin and making me the new Heir!”

This was...completely unexpected. But as the Venetian stood and bowed again, yes, Alexandra could see the family resemblance. Using a wandless spell to assuage her doubts, the result confirmed the older teenager wasn’t a Dark Wizard at all...but then as Lyre had proven, Light Wizards could exploit the opportunities left by the disappearances of their predecessors.

“I am pleased you are not troubled by the...smashing demise of your cousin,” Alexandra tried diplomatically.

“He hated fishing, this is the perfect ironic death as far as I am concerned!” Cicerone assured her. “Once more thank you, I owe you a favour, on my honour of De Medici!”

And the male student of the Scuola Regina ran away, certainly to celebrate his good fortune.

“I’ve never had those kinds of congratulations after my husband tragic deaths,” the Black Widow commented as she gave her a new glass of grape juice mixed with some sort of local magical substance. It was very good, maybe she would have to see if it could be commercialised on British soil?

“You never participated in an interschool Tournament either...nor did your husbands.”

“True,” Stella Zabini agreed. “Was the vampire delegation impressed? I lost you when this army of journalists came from everywhere.”

“They were. In fact, they think that with my actions during the First Task to back my words, the recent proposals I’ve discussed with Artemis Cassius have merit.” The young Ravenclaw witch frowned. “Of course, I don’t know how many Covens were represented in this delegation.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it for now,” her magical guardian said as she cast anti-spying retribution hexes. “There are only two Covens in Britain right now, and one, if I am not mistaken, is right there with the Death Eater delegation.”

“The Death Eaters are here?” With all these Dark Arts practitioners, it was not completely unexpected. The Headmistress wasn’t going to ban them until they proved a nuisance. “Ah, they came to support Warrington, I suppose?”

“Perhaps...the Slytherin boy showed a respectable amount of Dark Curses during the Earth Trial.”

“A pity most Dark Curses are useless against a Cockatrice...something that isn’t exactly a deep secret. I read it countless times in books about XXXXX-class creatures.” The fourth-year student felt her eyes narrow instinctively when she transfigured her eyes to improve her eyesight. “Stella...the blonde couple who are in mourning robes...they are Cassius Warrington’s parents, aren’t they?”

“Lord and Lady Warrington, yes,” the Black Widow confirmed. “I hope you do not plan to have them as your allies, Alexandra. They are not...pushing for politics and a future you would feel comfortable with.”

“Oh, I don’t want them as allies,” Death’s Champion smirked. “Have you seen who they are speaking with?”

“A brown-haired nonentity of the Department of Education?”

“That’s an illusion.” The Hydra Animagus whispered before calling a butler for a tray of fish food. “Under it, the man is black-haired, his skin is cadaveric as if he intended to join the vampire ranks...and he has quite vivid red eyes. I wonder how he received them?”

What a pity the Scuola Regina tolerated megalomaniac and aspiring world conquerors...unfortunately, given how many were in the Exchequer, barring them from entry would be likely counter-productive...and hypocritical.

“Voldemort,” the adult witch whispered.

“Yes,” the Champion of the Morrigan bared her teeth. “Do you think walking in his direction and lamenting upon the incompetence of Cassius Warrington’s tutors would enrage him enough to let the illusion fall?”

“I would prefer to avoid a major diplomatic incident tonight, Alexandra...”

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The lesson of the evening: never put yourself between a group of enthusiastic Badgers and their Champions. Cho had tried, and it was like a thunderstorm had seized her and thrown her away.

In a way the fifth-year Ravenclaw was extremely proud of that; her boyfriend was the second-ranked Champion of Hogwarts – out of three alive, but still – and though Cedric had not successfully completed the First Task, the Ravenclaw substitute didn’t really know how he could have done better without knowing more about the behaviour of Griffins.

As trying to grab the ‘Hero of Hufflepuff’ out of the crowd was a lost cause, she took a few step backs and noticed the hundreds of journalists and other witches and wizards who had besieged the Ravenclaws had gone away after having their curiosity – momentarily – satisfied.

“Well, well, well...” Morag MacDougal was the first to see her coming. “We have found back our missing substitute, oh my glorious Champion.”

“Morag...” Alexandra Potter growled, something that achieved the feat of being a bit intimidating even if it was done in good fun. Cho was quite thankful she intended to not break any oath or bargain made, because after throwing a Leviathan around, killing a Champion and sending one to a long-term period to a hospital, it was evident seriously angering the Champion of their House was a death sentence. “Good to see you back, Cho. I see Cedric is encircled by terrifying Badgers. What a dreadful fate.”

“I am here to recruit you in order to save him.” The aspirant Alchemist witch joked, and received a loud snort in answer.

“I did a Tournament Task today, I am not going to jump into another so soon after the First.”

“It’s not that terrible...”

The three fourth-year girls looked at her like she had said a stupidity, which to be fair, it was. House Hufflepuff, when united in a single purpose, could be truly terrifying.

“Anyway,” she tried to change the topic discussed, “since you mentioned a Second Task, do you have a first guess about what it is going to be?”

“Not a single one,” the green-eyed girl replied joyously. “The moment we left the Coliseum, I moved the sealed object to my villa and then my guardian arrived with the dress robes for the evening party. I will probably open it tonight once this whole affair of party, politics, and public relationship is over.”

“And you will have to keep it a secret from her,” the Irish redhead smirked. “Otherwise she’s going to run back to Cedric and tell him everything.”

“I am not that bad,” Cho protested, trying hard not to blush.

“You are that bad,” Hermione Granger raised an eye from the massive book the Potter Heiress had let her borrow from the rewards of the Tournament. “But don’t worry, Alexandra has Susan in Hufflepuff. It somehow compensates...I think.”

“Hey!” the winner of the First Task exclaimed. “No criticism of my red Badger while I am present!”

“We bow to your tyrannical whims, oh Empress of Emeralds and Lightning.”

“If I was so tyrannical, no one would dare spreading so many rumours about me,” the Ravenclaw Champion muttered under her breath. “Going back to what you said, Cho, I haven’t yet taken a decision how I am going to use the information I received as a ‘clue’ for completing the First Task. It depends a lot on what it is and how the Second Task will set the Champions against each other. If it is the same scenario we had this morning, sure I will give the clue to every Hogwarts Champion I like...”

Something, the older Ravenclaw witch didn’t comment upon, clearly disqualified Graham Montague.

“I’m sure Headmaster Dumbledore will appreciate...we are already badly lagging behind the Scuola Regina, you know.”

Alexandra Potter chuckled.

“Cho, I don’t want to be the messenger bearing bad news, but I doubt Hogwarts had ever a chance to claim the top school position...I won a lot of points, but the Scuola Regina had three Champions who completed their Tasks. Even if your boyfriend and Hooper manage a flawless performance on a perfect day, the best we can do is equal their performance, not surpass it...”

Yeah, in hindsight, the Slytherin Champion would always be a burden losing them quantities of points...

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There were things no Durmstrang student wanted to do when there was a festive party in the gardens of the Scuola Regina.

Trying to find out where the Dark Queen had gone and telling her presence was required by the Judges for more photos and journalist questions had to be at the top of this infamous list every Scandinavian-taught wizard or witch was supposed to memorise in weeks.

At least the tracking part was easy. A tentative Point-me Charm, and Astrid had a direction towards which she could orientate her searches. It led quickly to one of the private study rooms they had seen during their tour of the Venetian school-castle.

Lyudmila Romanov was there.

It wasn’t the thing which attracted all her attention when she knocked at the door to warn of her presence...even if it was already half-open, it was better to warn she was here.

No, what made her eyes widen was the worrying number of vodka bottles waiting on the study table, the large study table.

And all but two of said bottles were empty.

“Err...”

“They want me downstairs, don’t they?” The voice was filled with something like melancholia, but the words were certainly not slurred.

“Yes, they do...err...how can you-“

“How can I be not drunk, after so much vodka?” The Dark Queen’s sniff was a shadow of the usual haughtiness, but it was enough to convince Astrid this was not an imposter using Polyjuice. “My Animagus form eliminates alcohol, no matter how many bottles I drink.”

“Why try, then?” Astrid felt obligated to ask.

“Why not?” The green-eyed Champion shrugged. “I didn’t find anything better to do after being humiliated in the arena.”

“You weren’t humiliated. You-“

“I was beaten by a fourteen-year-old because I didn’t take her seriously.” The darkness was back in the Russian witch’s throat. “The only reason I didn’t pay the ultimate price is because I’m more or less impossible to kill.”

Well, the Norwegian noble wasn’t going to disagree about that. The Dark Queen, unlike Delacour, had been at ground zero of the lightning apocalypse unleashed by her terrifying cousin. And Delacour, a Light Champion according to the Regina rumour mill, had been directly sent to a Venetian Hospital in order for elite Healers to save her life. That Lyudmila Romanov was visibly unscarred and suffered no physical consequences from being roasted alive was evidence enough her claims were not so far-fetched.

“I should have transformed this entire Coliseum into a living hell of ice from the very start,” the blonde tyrant continued as if she was speaking alone. “That would have screwed up the plans of the Dark Fossil in addition to the death of Delacour and Medici. Potter would have survived, but she wouldn’t have been able to swim and escape me...and I would have not left her the opportunity to cast this Imperial Thunder in my face.”

One empty bottle shattered against the wall, despite no wand or any hand movement being made.

“I was too arrogant, by the Trickster’s false shoes...”

Astrid coughed.

“By the way, what is that spell that you threw against my cousin? The one which hit her in the chest and didn’t do anything?”

“Oh, that? It was a modified variant of an Entrail-Expelling Curse I’ve been working on my copious free time.” The lips of the Dark Queen became a disappointed snarl. “It worked fine on the prison scum I test my new spells upon, but I suppose it’s really insufficient to pierce the scales of a partial magical Animagus form.”

“Partial Animagus?”

“Oh, everyone missed it?” a wave of the older witch’s hand, and the shattered bottle was repaired and returned on the table. “When you do a Transfiguration of that level, the first thing to change is the eyes. And those of Alexandra Potter were definitely reptilian.” Lyudmila shook her head. “The inbuilt resistance of a Champion is always high, but with that she more or less can shrug off everything below a Class-Ten Curse...assuming it’s something not too magically powerful, and I won’t bet on that.”

Astrid grimaced. She knew three spells of that level...and one wasn’t a curse at all, but a defensive incantation.

“I should have taken her more seriously,” fast as a...well, far faster than her eyes could follow, Lyudmila had seized one of the bottles still containing alcohol and proceeded to empty it the same way she had ‘dealt with’ the rest of her vodka supply. “But she’s not like me.”

“Well, I didn’t see you using a lot of elemental spells these last-“

“She has a mother,” her words were interrupted and the meaning left her gaping, “friends...a family who cares for her. She isn’t like me.”

Astrid stayed silent, not knowing what to say. As far as she knew, no one had ever heard Lyudmila Romanov comment about what her private life was outside the walls of Durmstrang. Or at least if she had done so, the students and the teachers who had been present to hear it had carried the secret to their grave.

The melancholic look faded after several seconds...but the aggressiveness didn’t return. Not yet.

“All right. Let’s see what the Judges want this time and how long it is going to take.” The Dark Queen stood from her chair with her usual grace, and Astrid felt a bit of jealousy as even after drinking the equivalent of an inn’s vodka supply or more and the First Task, Lyudmila Romanov was still at the apex of the magical hierarchy. “And tell the others to come to my villa tomorrow at noon, please. The time for the velvet gloves is past, it’s time I seriously begin to work. This Tournament isn’t going to win itself, it seems.”

**6 November 1994**, **Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

It was late when Alexandra returned to her villa. So late in fact it was likely a new day, and Atalanta had already returned from her nightly hunt.

And the Leviathan-thrower – the name for some reason had begun to spread among the Hogwarts spectators – was mentally exhausted. Who knew having a crowd of journalists, politicians, rich nobles and other people surrounding you and baying for your attention would be so exhausting?

Thank the Morrigan she had not grown up with the knowledge she was the Girl-Who-Lived or some nonsensical title. It was the kind of fame which not only screwed your ‘studying magic schedule’ and swelled your head and your ankles until you had an ego as big as Draco Malfoy’s during first year.

Relaxation. This was what the Ravenclaw Champion needed, and thus she spent the next hour petting Atalanta before plunging into her personal swimming pool.

When the Hydra Animagus left the water after something like thirty minutes, the whole world appeared to asleep, as far as she could judge from her terrace. The Coliseum was half-hidden by the darkness, which was strangely appropriate, now that Alexandra thought about it.

And Atalanta didn’t miss this splendid opportunity to perch herself on her shoulders.

Who had taught the snowy owl to be such a diva? Because it certainly wasn’t her...

It was late, but Alexandra figured she might as well satisfy her curiosity before going to sleep. Entering the villa’s office which doubled down as armoury, the Champion of Death went to the main seat and summoned wandlessly the sealed box to her. One tiny spark of magic when touching the small seal, and it opened with a simple click.

Inside was a very standard roll...not of parchment, judging by the texture and the odour, but of papyrus. It was also copiously enchanted.

Her eyes being unable to tell her something more than that, Alexandra opened the scroll, and under her eyes an impressive quantity of authentic hieroglyphs were revealed.

“Oh dear, I knew Ancient Runes was the best elective...”

A smile had arrived on her lips. It immediately disappeared when she tried to read the first group of seven hieroglyphs.

“The Sun...crocodile...summons...scarab...scribe...” the fourth-year Ravenclaw tried a few more lines, but it was the same nonsense over and over. Perhaps she was reading in the wrong order and it was right to left?

“Fight...blue...dusk...fight...enigma...wand...trap...that doesn’t mean anything!”

In despair of cause, she tried to read it vertically...it gave worse results. Two more minutes, and her attempted translations were thrown into the dustbin...something necessary before she lost her patience and incinerated them.

“It has to be some kind of cipher.” Alexandra thought aloud while petting Atalanta. “The information is there...” a quick Charm informed her there was no invisible ink or something else to be read on the papyrus, “but how to access it?”

The problem, when it came down to it, was that learning how to read the hieroglyphs and making evocations with them wasn’t exactly the same thing as mastering the language, never mind finding the key which would allow oneself to decipher a complex message.

“Good news, girl, I know the Second Task is going to be about Ancient Runes.” There was a small possibility it wouldn’t be, but it would defeat the whole purpose of the clue, in all likelihood. “Bad news, it’s going to be a pain to find out the content of the clue in a single month.”

Atalanta hooted in approval...or maybe it was for more petting on her beautiful white feathers?

“You’re right, girl, this enigma can wait until tomorrow. Time to go to your golden perch...and I am going to my bed.”

**Author’s note**: Rest assured that unlike the canon Triwizard Tournament, the Judges of the European Magical Tournament haven’t released ‘clues’ which can be solved in two minutes by a first-year wizard or witch. Moreover, the Champions have only one month between the Tasks, so there is definitely a clock ticking from the moment the previous trial is over.

I don’t have decided how many chapters there will be before the Champions will face the Second Task, but it will at least be two. There’s a lot to write about the consequences of the First Task, searching for the clues of the Second, and of course discovering a whole new school...