**Chapter 118**

**Last Questions**

**The End of the Stairway, aka Loki's Prison**

"**I believe you have six questions left**."

Alexandra was not a hypocrite; here and now, though, she hesitated. The voice, the curiosity, the sheer will of mischievousness behind the words; it was like you were facing Fred and George merged into the same body, removed their morals and their inhibitions, and then raised to Godhood their motivation to spread Chaos.

Loki was not going to kill as many people as Apophis when Ragnarok came, but it was certain his hands would not be clean.

This hesitation didn't last long.

Sadly, the reality was that Ragnarok was coming. It didn't matter anymore what kind of bargain with the Powers Alexandra ended up making; Ra had destroyed the works which kept the Great Enemy weak and divided into several parts.

And thinking of sins closer to home, the ugly truth was that Loki was going to escape now, whether the Hydra Animagus wanted it or not.

There were six chains left.

Six, not seven. And that was a very big issue.

Sure, some non-magical solicitors would say that by destroying one, Alexandra had only weakened the awful-looking bonds of divine flesh, but they would be wrong.

Seven was an Arithmantic-powerful number; six was not.

The moment the hammer had struck, the ancient containment system was sentenced to be destroyed; the only question was how long it would take for the prisoner to escape.

There was no going back, and there was no 'I'm going to return eventually to ask further questions'; with her luck, when she came back Loki would already be gone.

No, it was better to not play that sort of game. Not with any Power, and certainly not an Aspect of Chaos.

"Where does the Great Enemy come from? And if you don't have any certain facts on it, please speculate."

"**The abomination came from the stars**." Loki's smile did not disappear, but it was now a rigid thing, something serving as a mask to hide other emotions.

"An alien, then."

"**Yes and no**."

Alexandra raised both eyebrows. No matter the standard of trickery, this was singularly unhelpful.

"**The Destroyer came from the stars, as I said. It arrived in a star-chariot, and our world shook when it announced itself, for in mere heartbeats, it destroyed the ninth planet of this system with its corrupt magic**."

Alexandra shook her heard in denegation.

"Impossible. The power to do that..." okay, Apophis had been far superior to any mage in living history, and that had been with several parts of its essence missing. Assuming you discarded that, there was a far more pressing issue. "And honestly, there is a ninth planet in this system. It hasn't been-"

Loki watched her silently, and let the silence speak for itself.

"It replaced the ninth planet with its 'star-chariot'." Which meant the planet everyone called Pluto was in reality a huge spaceship. And its true nature had been hidden by an extremely complex illusion or something else.

"**Mortals and non-mortals know there is something wrong about it**," Loki mused, "**they feel the urge to not call it a planet, no matter how convincing the illusion. Despite the sheer distance involved, the wrongness of the Great Enemy can't entirely be hidden. Of course, I doubt the Devourer of Hope thought its star-chariot would need it. It likely imagined the war against the humans would be decided in a matter of days. But it never returned, and so the star-chariot remained there, waiting for the return of its master**."

"That would explain why it is an alien," Alexandra pointed out. "Yet you answered 'yes and no'."

"**When this ugly star-chariot had finished its rotations and prepared to attack, the Seers of this world were seized by a vision of nightmare. They *saw* a Gate of unimaginable foulness activate in the heart of this eldritch orb that wasn't a world. It was through this Gate that the Great Enemy came. What lies beyond it, no one knows, but all the men and women who didn't kill themselves afterwards for witnessing this horror agreed that while the star-chariot travels the stars, the Destroyer of Civilisations does not. It might be that it comes from the last world he has obliterated; or it might be that the uncountable souls and things he feasted upon have forced it to stay in a miniature space-dimension away from the ravages of time. Or it might be something else. No one knows for sure what the Great Enemy truly *is***."

This was discouraging, all right. For a fleeting moment, Alexandra thought there was slim possibility of victory. If this Gate buried in the starship pretending to be Pluto was indeed critical, naturally the goal of Mankind was to destroy it. Do it swiftly, and there was a high likelihood Apophis would die.

But how the hell were they supposed to achieve that?

All the forms of teleportation had a very limited range of operation. From what the Queen of the Exchequer had told her, certain experiments had borne fruit and a few mages had been able to walk upon the dark side of the Moon.

But this had been incredibly difficult, and they were now operating at the limits of what magic could do.

They hadn't reached Mars, and the Red Planet was practically next door compared to Uranus and Neptune. The proposal to reach Pluto was just ridiculous, and to make it better, they had to do it in three years.

As for magical science, it could send satellites in that direction, but it would likely require several years before they arrived...and it was time they didn't have.

Time. Time was now an implacable enemy that couldn't be stopped.

Was it why the war-cry of the Olympians in the Greek mythology had been 'Death to Kronos'?

Death to Time itself?

Mjölnir struck.

There was another sizeable explosion, and this time it was as if a dark cloud spread out of Loki's body before fleeing in the direction of the cavern's entrance.

Alexandra breathed out.

There was a strong temptation to ask more. To plead the Aspect of Chaos to speculate on what was needed to get rid of Apophis for good.

But it would be a mistake.

Her imbecile of Light double from another reality believed there was an answer ready for him here, but nothing could be further from the truth. If Loki had this solution from the start, the Ancients would not have gone for the Great Ritual which broke Apophis into seven parts. They would have killed the monster. The Pharaoh who had sired Ra and Osiris had far more powerful magical weapons than the wizards and witches of today did, and they weren't reluctant at all to use them when the alternative was extinction.

Neither Loki nor any other Power could give out a perfect plan, because there had been none found the first time around.

As for the idea of replicating the Great Ritual, it was a stupid idea. The first time had ended almost immediately in disaster with Ra becoming the Avatar of Light and ushering a new catastrophe upon the entire world, and in particular Africa. It had ushered **in** the Wars of the Light and the Dark.

And of course there was no guarantee it would work again; Apophis had been subjugated by this Great Ritual once, but the abomination was cunning; it would do its utmost to avoid being trapped by the same ruse again.

No, something new would be needed. Something Apophis would never see coming until it was too late.

"How did you have the idea that Balder was vulnerable to mistletoe in the first place, Lord Loki?"

She received a vicious grin in return. Evidently, the God of Mischief was pleased by her question.

"**Now that is an interesting tale, Champion of the Morrigan. And at its head, I suppose that the fault lies with Order**."

"Truly?"

"**Truly!**" the Aspect of Chaos assured her. "**It is a reality that everyone must die sooner or later, except Death itself. It is in the nature of things, whether you are a fox or a great wizard, a peasant or a King, a God or a worm. Everyone must die eventually. So when they began speaking of the need of making the *perfect* Balder impossible to kill...oh, it angered me something fierce**."

"It could have given humanity better chances during the Ragnarok...the first one, I mean."

"**Oh, please**," Loki rolled his eyes. "**Balder was only *perfect* in front of his parents and his friends. Those who did know the true him were far less enthusiastic about having that brute free from all limitations of Godhood. There was a *sickness* within him, something**-"

Loki stopped speaking, but he had already said too much.

The Chaos Power had seen in Balder the seeds of something that could eventually become a strong mirror to Apophis.

And for this, Balder had to die.

Somehow, Alexandra didn't doubt Loki had also been invoked during the First War against the Great Enemy. Him or a magical God who would eventually become him, at any rate.

Apophis was apparently invincible, breaking all the principles of magic and the balances that had kept a fragile equilibrium to the world. If the Great Ritual had not been Loki's idea, then the Champions acting in his name must have been involved somehow.

And both Osiris and Ra had hated Loki with a passion. No doubt the God of Mischief had tried to remove them plenty of times in the last several millennia. Actually, one could easily assess that the last attempt had been successful thanks to Loki, since Lyudmila had played a major role in the Quest and the battle to end the Archmage of Light.

Loki eliminated those who wanted to break the cycle. He was Chaos to the stagnation of Order, the angry whispers of revolt against eternity.

Mjölnir struck a third time.

"Did you ensure your Champion would rise to help us all against the Great Enemy, or to kill me if I one day lose my way and try to become what I've sworn to fight against?"

"**Yes**."

It was a question lost, but it was worth it to have the confirmation of this not-so-subtle blade.

Lyudmila was powerful because she had to be a monster for the final battle, yes. She also was a future Empress of Magic because that was what it would take to kill Alexandra if she decided to become a new Avatar of Darkness, a Dark Lady to rule permanently over the world and condemn wizardkind to several more millennia of stagnation and idiocy.

For the fourth time, the hammer of Thor broke the ancient bonds keeping the architect of Balder's death prisoner.

Alexandra licked her lips. It had been an idea she'd had since Morgane told her how the Powers were functioning before Ra came around, but there had been really no one to discuss the theory of it, since everyone of that time was dead or gone.

"Before the Great Enemy came, were the Champions tied to one, three, or seven Aspects of their Powers when they pledged themselves?"

"**Now, little Hydra**," Chaos thundered. "**You are beginning to ask the right questions**."

**27 March 1995, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"We're going to have to speak with Alexandra about her definition of punctuality."

Morag smirked. It was always way too funny to hear one Hermione Granger grumble during breakfast.

"She didn't give us a deadline for the latest Quest she agreed to," the MacDougal Heiress pointed out.

"But she has an important diplomatic meeting in three hours!"

"Hermione, relax, it's just the preliminary talks about what is going to happen to the Conqueror's treasure." Morag sipped some fruit juice before continuing. "And honestly, Alexandra is very punctual most of the time. When she's not, it's generally because there is an army of enemies in the way that she had to get rid of first."

"True," the bushy-haired girl conceded grudgingly.

"Good to have you say it." Morag didn't gloat, of course. "Now what was it about the latest message of the Judges?"

"They want to see the Champions in the Coliseum, all of them."

The red-haired Ravenclaw whistled.

"They really didn't waste any time, did they? I thought they would wait for a few more weeks. After all, there are many more days until the Summer Solstice."

"All we know is that there's the Summer Ball and the ceremonies formally ending the Tournament on that day, Morag. That's the rules Alex shared with us, and every other Champion of our school said the same. They don't have to organise a last Task in June at the last minute. If they 'invite' all the Champions to participate in the Sixth Task in April, and the Seventh Task in May, it works too."

"You're right." Morag admitted. "But there's another explanation, I think."

"Really?"

"They want a very impressive Task to end this Tournament, so they organise the Sixth Task as fast as possible, to give them two months of leeway between the last two trials. They didn't rush anything because they want the whole competition to end before June in that case; they are just making sure the April Task is out of the way for the grand finale."

"That could work too." Hermione acknowledged before grimacing. "Of course, given the sadism of the Judges, we won't know for sure before-"

Every conversation in the 'Breakfast Hall' suddenly stopped, for the cloud-covered sky was pierced by what felt like a thousand light arrows.

It was magnificent.

It was radiance incarnate.

It was a gigantic rainbow which coalesced before slamming into the gardens of the Scuola Regina.

There was a powerful magical shockwave, and Morag thought that for a moment she heard a thousand war horns playing a musical note in unity.

And then it ended.

The next second, hundreds of students were out of their chairs, and were rushing fast to a very obvious destination.

"See, Hermione?" Morag commented sarcastically. "I told you Alex was punctual!"

"But...but...but..." Hermione's brain seemed to have shut down for a few heartbeats. "*How*?"

"I don't know, but I'm really eager to learn the full tale behind that spectacular entrance!"

**27 March 1995, Alexandra's villa, Lands of the Scuola Regina**

"And when I shattered the last bond holding Loki prisoner, Lyudmila transformed into a giant bird, and we flew back to the Bifröst Tower."

This definitely had not been a funny part, holding on for dear life, while she was sure the Champion of Chaos had enjoyed both the travel and her unease.

"After that," she shrugged, "to be honest, it was kind of boring. We waited, and the moment the magical bridge of the Aesir was functional again, we used it. I think it is the big reason why we lost all of Sunday and almost missed the beginning of Monday."

"And what a relief it was," Morag smiled. "Hermione was going to begin to be very worried you were neglecting your duties."

"These were only preliminary talks," admittedly, missing them would not have amused the wizards sent for the aforementioned meeting. Fortunately, there had still been a large amount of time to have her breakfast, go to her villa to grab her 'homework', and then attend the conference.

"According to certain influential students who were invited as observers, it was far more than that."

"Trying to stop Brown and Patil's top spot of Gossip Queens?"

"I wasn't seeing it like that, but it's not a bad goal in life, I suppose!"

The Champion of Death sighed theatrically.

"Please don't, the ones we have are already more than enough to fulfil all the requirements of the Hogwarts and non-Hogwarts rumour mills." The green-eyed Hydra Animagus snorted before returning to the very serious subject. "There was progress, yes. Plenty of important people agreed that dividing the artefacts and all the precious stuff would just be asking for trouble. None of the nations Alexander pillaged and conquered exist today, and the cultural legacy extends to the entire eastern Mediterranean. One might say that large-scale wars have been fought for far more stupid reasons in the last two thousand years."

"And how do they intend to solve this problem?"

"A museum in Cyprus as a symbol of peace for everyone," the young Champion revealed. "You know that the island is divided on the non-magical side."

"Technically, it is the same on the magical side," the MacDougal Heiress replied. "I mean, yes, there is a 'Ministry of Magic of Cyprus', but everyone knows that the ICW-appointed garrison is effectively the government. That was the only way the two communities could settle for peace after the ruinous war of the 1700s."

It was a dreadful irony that said civil war had nothing to do with Greek, Turk, or any kind of cultural legacy, but whether the local wizards and witches were for or against the Statute of Secrecy.

It had definitely been a terrible bloodbath, though.

The pro-Statute side had won...in theory. In practise, everyone had lost; the island's magical system had been in the process of disintegration when the ICW at last acted as a coherent force and intervened.

"I think this was not far from anyone's minds, yes. And with the instability of the nations building up the ICW these days, there are many voices urging to decrease the commitments, especially if they are military and expensive. A proper reunification of Cyprus, magical and non-magical, would largely be applauded on every side. The loudest imbecile is not here anymore to protest against it."

If Ra was still around, Alexandra had no doubt whatsoever the Archmage would have tried to ruin the burgeoning peace process. Plenty of terms whispered in the meeting would have been seen as 'surrender of Light to the Dark' by the Army of the Light and the other fanatics.

But they weren't here anymore.

"This is encouraging."

"There's still a lot to do just for a draft to be sent to every government, and this involves the magical and the non-magical ones. Just to begin with, it's clear some artefacts can't be placed where the public can touch them; imagine the potential for trouble if someone breaks an urn. In a classical non-magical museum, it would be a tragic loss for the archaeological world; here with our luck, said urn would contain a Djinn, and in a few minutes, we would have it propose all kinds of 'wishes' to every person in the museum."

"Ouch," Morag commented with a large smile.

"Ouch is the right word, yes," Alexandra declared sarcastically. "And now that this sum-up of my week-end is done, what is it I've heard about the Sixth Task?"

"The Judges want to speak to all of you on the first day of April!" Hermione announced proudly.

Alexandra felt the need to raise both eyebrows.

"Are we sure this is *not* another prank of Fred and George?"

"Ha!"

**28 March 1994, Lyudmila's Villa, Lands of the Scuola Regina**

Counting up to one hundred, she had changed at least forty times the colour of her nails and two dozen times the shade of her hair.

It was like an itch that she couldn't remove.

It was an annoyance that persisted no matter what you tried in order to squash it.

It was a flame that was more persistent than anything Light Magic had ever been able to achieve against her.

It was none of those things, of course.

Her soul was *discordant* now.

For all things, there was a price, and this was both her reward and her punishment.

Lyudmila was a true child of Chaos, and that was something not even Fate could do anything against anymore.

The sound of footsteps arrived at last.

She didn't bother setting several candles alight.

Neither her guest nor she needed them, having perfect night vision.

"Your welcoming manners could use some improvement. Or am I supposed to take a message from your new appearance?"

Lyudmila grimaced. In a couple of seconds, her inattention had seen her body transform a human shell to one that could be best described as snake-like. Now she had black scales, and looked very much like an Animagus Cobra who had missed some Transfiguration steps.

"Apologies," the Champion of Chaos said once she had regained control and a far more 'normal' appearance. "Adjusting to the changes is proving...difficult."

"Adjusting? Not controlling?"

"If there was some incredible amount of control, it wouldn't be called the Power of Chaos," she grunted. "As it is, I think the best I will get over this is *influence*, maybe accompanied by the power to not succumb to the feral instincts accompanying each transformation."

"Well," Alexandra Potter took the blue seat facing her, "I'm quite glad I am not the Champion of Chaos."

"As if you qualified for it," the currently blonde-haired witch snorted. "Loki and you would have tried to murder each other mere minutes after the initial oaths."

"Possibly." Lyudmila stared. "No, certainly. I can see the fun of a good pun, but I wouldn't want to live a life where unpredictability is carved into my mind and soul."

Few would. Plenty of wizards and witches would scream if their arms suddenly covered themselves in fur as hers had just done.

"If it is any consolation, I think you impressed him."

Alexandra Potter hissed.

"I wish the Trickster could have not found another way but to answer my question by pouring his very power into you. The whole process was really disturbing to watch, and not just because you were screaming so much."

"I admit it was...*not pleasant*."

"'Not pleasant' is being beaten by Krum and smashing into the Coliseum's barriers at high speed," the Champion of Death acidly replied. "What happened to you was significantly worse than that."

"But you got your answer."

"I had my answer, yes." The British-born witch wasn't impressed at all by the manner of delivery, it went without saying. "Three for Chaos, and because your Power prepared you exactly for that."

"It had to be done."

By the glare alone, Alexandra Potter was absolutely not convinced by the statement.

"I suppose it is a way to continue the Cycle and pass the torch to other Aspects, while keeping it *in the family*."

"I would prefer if you could keep it for yourself, obviously."

The Champion of Death rolled her reptilian green eyes.

"I will keep the secret, don't worry. And besides 'Champion of Loki' sounds far better than 'Champion of Fenrir, Jörmungandr, Hela Incarnate, all blessed and cursed by Loki'."

"It does." Lyudmila acknowledged with a large grin...and received another unimpressed snort for the effort.

They stayed silent for what felt like hours. Silent, but not unchanging; she lost count on how many transformations she was under. And her clothes suffered for it, as sure as night came after day. In the last hours, if someone had offered to sell her a Changelina, Lyudmila knew she would have accepted it, as long as the price wasn't her soul. She was going to need very special clothes, or her wardrobe would be completely ruined within days.

"When do you intend to go for the Seal and complete the bond of Darkness?"

"The moment we left Asgard, I knew it had to be done as fast as possible," she answered truthfully. "But with the Judges having launched another phase of the Tournament, this isn't realistic. I will have to wait until after the Sixth Task."

Her expression and the absence of a retort told clearly the younger Champion had expected the words.

"I'm sorry for the unofficial act of expulsion Loki made when he changed me, by the way."

"I'm not going to pretend I wasn't angry at his lamentable and not-funny joke," Alexandra told her, "but it's his fault, not yours. And in a better world, I would never have been a Champion of the Dark. I practise the Dark Arts, I won't deny it. But it's never been my weapon of choice."

"True, you always preferred Elemental Magic and Charms." She hadn't forgotten the First Task, and she doubted she ever would, no matter how long she lived. "Have you chosen the path you will take?"

"Like a certain Power of Chaos said, yes and no."

"It wasn't funny when he said it."

"Then you better hope no one will have reason to utter those words in this villa again, your Dark Majesty."

**29 March 1994, Library of Alexandria, Exchequer Enclave**

"I think we will have to work somewhat on efforts to control your curiosity."

Alexandra didn't wince, because she had expected that remark long before the appointment was 'requested'.

"Visiting Asgard and running through a root of Yggdrasil seemed an opportunity that should not be missed at the time."

"And now?"

"Now," the Ravenclaw witch acknowledged, "with the benefit of hindsight, a bit more support and preparations wouldn't have been superfluous."

"Good," the Queen of the Exchequer answered, as they walked between the immense shelves. "It ended well, so I am not going to continue the criticism, but you have to realise that there are many mages who are ultimately replaceable, and you are not among them."

"Is it because you know for certain that we have only three years left now?" Alexandra asked.

"No," Morgane Rys'Ygraine Avalon promptly crushed that idea into the dust, "in that regard, the words of Chaos don't change anything. Seven years would have been far better to prepare, of course. Time is the ruin of Kings and armies alike. If we had been given more time, everyone on this world, from the Exchequer to the non-magical officers, would have appreciated the gift. But it is three years. It will have to do, but it also means there are few scenarios where we can afford to train from scratch a new Champion of Magic if we lose the one we have."

Alexandra grimaced and didn't bother hiding it.

"We lost a lot of Champions, both Light and Dark, during the Fourth Task."

The black-cloaked legendary witch didn't comment, which sadly gave even more weight to the argument.

"Did the King have a hint this was something that could pass? He spared Delacour, when he could have easily killed her."

"The King was in the habit of using weapons until they broke, then to discard them in a way which wouldn't hurt the Exchequer." This was, alas, totally unsurprising. "There were more debates to be honest about what to do with the Champion of Chaos. Those chosen by the shape-shifter Trickster can be the greatest allies like they can be one's worst enemies."

By this week, it was likely a huge percentage of the Scuola Regina's student body understood that perfectly.

"You have tied your survival to the Champion of Chaos now, Alexandra. Whatever you intend to do ultimately, remember that fact."

"I will." Lyudmila was the Guardian of the Bifröst now, and she wouldn't relinquish it; the Powers knew Alexandra wouldn't either. The world thus needed her, for it would be a massive advantage when the Black Sun fell and the final battle began.

"But enough about the Champion of Chaos for today," the legendary witch-turned-vampire declared. "I understand you came about important information when you visited Asgard."

"I did. Obviously, there was the confirmation that the Light never had a plan to properly deal with major threats. Ra and his cronies never had one, beyond hoping a miracle of the Light would save them at the end, or that Fate would show them the greatest weakness of their enemies on the eve of the final battle."

"Obviously," Morgane said neutrally. "And though you didn't ask the question to Loki or any other Power, I will confirm that trying to contact other dimensional realities close to ours is a fool's errand."

"I thought that would be the case," she admitted. "I admit there was a moment I was tempted, when we had the time to reflect on this as the Bifröst Tower repaired itself. But in other realities, there would likely be other forms of opposition in addition to the Great Enemy. The Statute of Secrecy was still in place apparently in the one where my double comes from."

"There have been enough contacts in history to determine a few truths," the Queen of the Exchequer informed her. "The realities that are close enough to each other in general only differ very little from ours. One can only experience contact with them seven times in a lifetime, and this only with great risk for the one who initiates the contact."

The Hydra Animagus hissed.

"That would mean that in each reality that we could possibly be close enough to send or receive a message, the eldritch horror that is Apophis will wait for us in some form."

"It would be possible that the Great Enemy remains dormant and safely imprisoned," Morgane voiced optimistically, "though as the words of the other world's Champion of Fate hint at, this might be a fool's hope in the end. I will admit that the Exchequer abandoned this avenue of research over two centuries ago, and after several disastrous failures. We were born into this world, and we already have far too many problems in need of urgent solutions to waste energy and resources with other dimensions."

Green eyes so similar to hers stared at her.

"If other uninvited visitors decide rudely to barge into some place where you are present, I advise you to kick them out like you just did."

"I will certainly keep it in mind," the male version who could have been her, this 'Harry Potter' – and seriously, what was up with this name? That had to be one of James Potter's ideas, 'Harry' just sounded ridiculous. Unless it was a nickname for 'Harrold'? Morrigan, she hoped not, that made the entire thing *worse*. "And on an entirely different subject, I will note that the answers I obtained from the Aspect of each Power sounded really familiar: one, three, seven."

"Arithmantic stability has not changed a lot in several millennia of magic," her future Mistress answered in a pleased tone. "Never forget that sometimes, the foundations of magical lore are as important today as the day when they were first learned and memories for the generations to come."

**1 April 1995, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

After five Tasks, Cedric had not participated in the extensive games of guessing what the Judges would show them in the Coliseum today.

When they had been authorised to enter ten days before the Fifth Task, they had learned nothing save the fact they were going to do some broom-racing.

Yes, plenty of Champions had been convinced – correctly, as it happened – that the race was going to lead them outside of the Coliseum, but that hadn't been some reasoning worthy of a genius. The Coliseum of the Scuola Regina was big, but nothing was *that* huge.

Thus before trying to decide what the Judges had summoned them for, the big question was if the organizers of the Tournament intended to give them some important clues, or just play the 'sadistic bastard role' that they seemed to find so much delight in over the last months.

Alas, since these men and women had chosen the first of April to open the doors of the Coliseum again, Cedric's hopes had never been that great.

And now that he had to line up with the three other Champions of Hogwarts, the Hufflepuff boy knew he had been completely right.

"Grass," Graham Montague muttered on his right. "Please someone tell me this is a joke. Am I dreaming, right? Grass!"

"Grass and mushrooms," Alexandra Potter corrected with a frown, left of Angelina Johnson, who had decided to place herself between the Ravenclaw and himself. "And I think it is normal grass, yes. I don't feel any magic imbued into it."

"And the mushrooms?" Cedric asked.

"Oh, the mushrooms are magical." Of course, they were. Why couldn't things ever be simple?

"Right," Montague cleared his throat, "but are they going to be of any use? Because last time I checked, even with powerful and rare mushrooms used in certain Potions, you need entire bags of them to have the effect you want. And here, well, excuse me, but these mushrooms are incredibly tiny. I certainly see why they told us to follow the lines and get into these simple circles. Otherwise we would trample the mushrooms without trying!"

"As much as I hate to admit it..." Angelina sighed. "Our Slytherin Champion has a point."

"Hey!"

The three other Hogwarts alumni chose to ignore the offended huff and the protestation which followed.

Cedric tried to listen to the conversations of the Champions from the other schools, but everyone seemed to be as puzzled as them.

"Could it be possible we are going to have a Herbology Task?" the most dangerous witch of Hogwarts tried in an unconvinced voice. "We had Offensive Magic, a very practical application of magical creatures, Ancient Runes, Potions, Charms and Illusions for the Carnival, and Transfiguration and Flying more recently."

"Wouldn't the Potions Task have counted as a Herbology one too?" the athletic Gryffindor Chaser countered.

"It would have, if there hadn't been all those Alchemical reagents." Potter's eyes never stopped analysing, judging, calculating, and examining her surroundings as she spoke. But this frightening amount of focus didn't seem to produce any result. "Maybe it is one more joke of Fred and George?"

Angelina Johnson snickered.

"Well, it *is* their birthday today." The smile she showed them was vicious, though. "But if they somehow managed to copy every Judge's signature to make a prank involving the sixteen Champions all at once, I think they're going to be on the receiving end of a punishment the likes their twin backsides have never experienced before."

"I really didn't know to get *that* information," Montague grumbled. "What is going to happen for a Herbology Task? Surely it can't get too dangerous, no?"

The Ravenclaw Champion shrugged.

"We had the Temple of Plants as a preliminary, and I found it rather easy."

"Of course you did," Cedric thought he wasn't the only Champion to roll his eyes. Potter had crushed them effortlessly during that preliminary. Clearly, they should have taken it as an advanced warning of what was going to happen during the real Tournament, but they hadn't, to their sorrow. "If there's a Temple of Plants here, the machinery of the Coliseum is hiding it under the grass."

"And of course we can't verify it until they open the arena like they did at the beginning of the Fifth Task," Angelina said fatalistically. "The only good news, as far as I can see, is that the other schools are as lost as to the purpose of this grass as we are."

"Not unexpected. There is really not a lot to speculate about." The top scorer of the Tournament emitted a loud hiss that could have fooled plenty of snakes. "It could easily be a Care of Magical Creatures-type Task. With all this grass and mushrooms, there is easily enough to feed a quantity of herbivores today."

"The Judges are at last coming."

"One can only pray for common sense to prevail..."

"Champions! We are very glad to see you once more gathered in this splendid arena today!"

"We are so pleased you think so," Romeo Malatesti replied sarcastically. "Can we please skip the cheerful lies and go straight to the rules of the Sixth Task?"

"Of course!" The smile of the male Judge – Cedric honestly didn't remember the name of this one – was not giving him a lot of good vibes. It sounded like they were going to be the punching-balls of one of those jokes-

"And?" Lucrezia Sforza purred when no explanation immediately followed.

"The Sixth Task of the European Magical Tournament will take place on a Saturday, and it will happen this month! You will have the right to enter the arena with your primary magical focus, be it your wand or another artefact you will have previously registered, though a specific list of forbidden creations will be published tomorrow."

What? This was even less than they'd been told before the First Task!

"You're telling us you don't intend to tell us a single thing about the grass and the mushrooms?" If Fleur Delacour's eyes could kill, there would be a lot of dead Judges in the next minute. There was no need to be gifted to see the shroud of flames coming into existence around her. It felt like an inferno you wanted to be far, far away from. And yes, the Hogwarts Champions were separated by Beauxbatons by the four representatives of the Scuola Regina.

"We thought the arena could benefit from a change of scenery. You have to admit it is a nice change of scenery, no?"

Yes, Delacour would have incinerated the wizard if it hadn't resulted in her immediate disqualification.

"Potter?"

"Yes, Diggory?"

"I have a really bad feeling about this Sixth Task."

"You too?"

**2 April 1995, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

How many times had the four Champions of Hogwarts met each other when the rules of the Tournament didn't require it?

Alexandra had honestly no idea.

The only thing that was quite certain was that without the ex-Headmaster desperately trying to keep the delusional illusion that Hogwarts was united, there would have been far fewer gatherings.

Of course, for the tensions to decrease, plenty of the School Champions had to lose their title first. For Warrington, this had been accompanied by the loss of his life.

And with the Tournament about to end and Hogwarts assured to not win the interschool contest, this temporary alliance had come way too late to do any good.

"Professor Sprout confirmed the mushrooms the Judges showed us are magical but with only minor healing properties." Cedric Diggory closed the book in front of him. "Unless someone wants to suggest the sadists have managed to create entirely new mushrooms just for the Tournament?"

"No," Montague shook his head. "Too many problems with the Potion and Herbalist Guilds, and plenty of Ministries are in hot water with them already due to the breaking of the Statute."

"Unfortunately, assuming they're *sane*," Angelica Johnson's tone hinted she had reasonable doubts about it, "that still leaves plenty of options."

"I agree." Alexandra played again the few instructions they had been given. "And there's worse. We don't even know for sure it is going to happen inside the Coliseum."

"He mentioned the arena." Graham Montague looked at her like she had become crazy.

"There was no confirmation that it had to be this Coliseum's." The Lady Protector shrugged. "I could be wrong. Or perhaps it is just one cheaper arrow to make us doubt everything."

"But we can't take the risk." The Gryffindor Champion finished for her. "If we get to the wrong place while the Tournament is somewhere else entirely, we would have to face enough humiliation to bury us for weeks."

"Yes." Come on, couldn't they get a nice Task facing a horde of monsters, sword in hand, that she could smash in a few minutes? And if they couldn't have that, was it too much to ask for a good Clue or two? "It seems that this Sixth Task is deliberately created to leave us completely in the dark for what is waiting for us."

"It could be a good thing," Montague managed to make everyone's head turn towards him.

"I hope, for your sake, that you aren't going to say a colossal stupidity," the Champion of Death warned him.

"I wanted...we are not Herbology specialists, right?" The Slytherin Champion didn't sweat, but he definitely blushed. "Diggory here is likely the best of us in that class, since he was the one who had the best grade, his Head of House urges all Badgers to study assiduously the subject, and he got accepted for the NEWT curriculum. The other Champions are likely better than us in Herbology. With nobody knowing what the Task is, we won't be at a significant disadvantage."

This wasn't an idiotic point of view, yes. Of course-

"It assumes of course that we are indeed going to have a Herbology Task." Angelina mused. "Or something that can be considered Herbology. Thoughts, oh Champion of Ravenclaw?"

"The evident proposals for something related to plants are obstacle course and ingredient harvesting for a Potion. The former would be very much like the Temple of Plants. The other would be akin to a hunt in the greenhouses, followed by a brewing session."

Alexandra let her hand almost get fully covered by black scales before reversing the transformation.

"But if it's *that* evident to me, I guess it is evident for everyone."

"Couldn't it be something else?"

Cedric scratched his head, and his expression was not exactly one of joy.

"What 'something else' are we talking about, Montague? There are clear limits to what you can and can't do when it comes to Herbology. Save the Fourth Task, no part of the competition was supposed to take more than a few hours to be done, and most plants don't grow that fast."

"Devil's Snare can," the Champion of Ravenclaw pointed out.

"Yes, but it isn't going to be sent here. Otherwise all the Champions would use fire hexes to set it aflame."

"And the mushrooms?"

"Do you realise how many magical varieties there are, without counting the non-magical ones?" Cedric Diggory said in what was certainly a rhetorical question. "And in the improbable case we are all willing to spend hours after hours studying mushrooms and grass until we're sick of it, I haven't forgotten that the Task is happening this month. The last Saturday of April falls on the twenty-ninth. That leaves twenty-seven days maximum, and based on our last experiences, I don't think we will get them."

"Can't we bribe a Judge, so as to know in advance what the Task will be?"

"The Judges took Oaths exactly to prevent that, Montague," Alexandra wasn't impressed by the words; they clearly hinted the Slytherin had either skipped reading this part of the rules, or he had somehow forgotten in the last months. "Plus you would get significant penalties, up to your disqualification and forfeiting a large gold fine. The stakes simply aren't worth it."

"Then what do you intend to do?"

Alexandra chose to adopt a pious and innocent expression.

"Me? Oh, nothing much. I was just thinking that my last strategy was sufficient to give me the second place."

"Yeah, but you knew the Fifth Task was a broom race." Angelina returned the smile. "And no matter how many steaks you promise to your dragon, I don't think convincing the golden scoundrel to eat the mushroom is a good idea!"

"Who was speaking about dragons?" the Champion of Ravenclaw snorted. "My strategy was and remains to *cheat*. Bringing a dragon to the battlefield was only what I needed then."

Cedric coughed loudly.

"Err...yeah. But you can only bring your wand or another magical focus for this Task."

"This has not stopped me before, Champion of Badgers, and it isn't going to stop me now..."

**3 April 1995, the Scuola Regina's Library**

"Just a few books to study, eh?"

The words carried only a bit of irony Alexandra was famous for, but Hermione felt herself blushing.

She had not visited that part of the library often, and most of the time when she approached it, it was only to give cursory glances, never to open dozens of books and seek research material.

How was she supposed to know there were *three bloody alleys* dedicated entirely to the culture, harvest, and properties of *mushrooms*?

"I was a bit optimistic," she gritted through her teeth.

"Yes, you were," the Ravenclaw Champion smiled for a couple of seconds before wincing. "I am not going to study *that*."

"Not the motivation?" Morag chuckled, imitated by Blaise Zabini and Tracey Davis, who had followed them to satisfy their curiosity.

"Not the time," the Champion of Ravenclaw corrected. "I love reading, but I already have so many books and parchments waiting for my eyes inside my villa that I am not going to add several heavy volumes on mushrooms."

"Would you have said the same if the books were about flying brooms?" the son of the Black Widow asked.

"No," Alexandra admitted, putting a hand in her black hair. "But then if these were brooms we were speaking about, there wouldn't be so many things to read about. There's three-quarters of a long shelf for them in this library, right?"

"Right," Hermione confirmed. And plenty of it was about the *creation* of brooms, not the exploits of a Quidditch legendary player or the list of rules. "I see there are books missing. We're not the first ones to have the idea to visit."

"The contrary would have been surprising," her black-haired friend shrugged, before checking some missing slot. "At least we know now what Lucrezia Sforza was doing."

"We do?" Blaise drawled.

"We do. The pile of books in her hands is large enough to be the first three volumes of the *Paradise of Mushrooms* collection."

"That promises to be a very boring read," Tracey Davis didn't sob when she checked the fourth volume, but her usual cheerful personality had decided to take some holidays.

"It is, and honestly, I'm pretty sure this is not the correct course of action."

"You could be wrong," Morag reminded Alexandra.

"I could. Hermione, remember me the title, please."

"*Magical Mediterranean Mushrooms and their Properties*, by Luigi Doria," the young witch repeated faithfully. "It seems part of the book was used by Hadrian White for his magnum opus *Magical Mediterranean Plants and their Properties*."

"He copied most of the text, you mean," Morag said in a scornful tone. "Many authors on our side of the Channel are fond of plagiarism."

"That's not exactly true..."

"Hermione, Hadrian White relied on the fact the original book's title was in Italian to hide he had changed a single word of it before taking most of the content for himself."

"Thus the need to read the original instead of the copy," Alexandra interrupted. "And we have only thirty minutes before dinner, so let's look for it, the discussion on how mediocre certain pure-blood authors proved to be will have to wait for another time."

Everyone who knew Alexandra wasn't surprised to see her charge into an alley and begin to read the titles of the mushroom books, obeying her own command before they had finished blinking.

Hermione hesitated, then chose to follow her.

Not because she was fond of learning anything about mushrooms, no.

Honestly, Hermione really disliked mushrooms, and avoided them as best as she could.

The taste on her tongue tended to be...most of the time not to her taste, really. And she had an allergy to a few samples that her parents had let her eat in her childhood.

Hermione was proud to say she had good grades in Herbology, but there was no denying that when it came to mushrooms, she let others do the practical. Better them than her, or so she tried to justify herself.

It took a good minute to catch up with Alexandra. With her super-powered eyes of Hydra, her friend could read really, really fast.

"Yes, Hermione?" the serpentine eyes never turned towards her, but the bushy-haired girl didn't doubt that Alexandra didn't need to, courtesy of unbelievably powerful magical senses.

"You didn't tell us what you asked the God of Chaos at the end," she whispered. "Is it about Susan?"

Alexandra...began to chuckle very loudly.

"Hermione, of all the things I'm not going to ask to the Power of Chaos, his opinion on my love life is at the top of the list."

"Ah? I thought that with him forced to tell you the truth-"

Alexandra grinned.

"Hermione. Loki told me the truth or something as close to it as to his essence authorises him to tell because the Ragnarok draws near and my questions can have an important part to play in its survival. Information about how much time we have left? That's critical. The nature of the Great Enemy? It's something we have to know to make certain plans and avoid some pitfalls."

The long fingers caressed the leather cover of an ancient book.

"How long and how stable the relationship with my current girlfriend will be does not belong to any 'important' category, on the other hand. And the Trickster knows it. I'm rather sure that if I had dared voicing such a question, Lyudmila's patron would have made me regret it in short order."

Ten seconds later, the Basilisk-Slayer's voice had decreased to become a whisper on the same level as hers.

"And honestly, I respect Susan far too much to ask that sort of question when she is not present to listen to it. I have done some rude things, Hermione, but that would be just...selfish and distrustful."

That made sense...Hermione wouldn't have dared ask the words for Viktor, ultimately.

"No, Hermione. The last question I asked the Power of Chaos was about this Summer Solstice."

"And was the news good?"

"No," her friend sighed. "But for once, it's not the fault of Chaos. Really, one can say-"

"Alex, I found it!" Morag's voice was far from a shout, but it sounded like one in the death-like silence of this part of the Venetian library.

"I chose the wrong shelves, it appears." The Ravenclaw Champion shook her head. "We will continue this conversation later, Hermione."

**5 April 1995, the Forbidden Forest, close to Hogwarts, Scotland**

The mushroom was quite clearly poisonous.

Its foot was silvery, the ring was fluorescent blue, and the hat was a flamboyant red with golden dots.

In a world where animals and plants alike tried to show clearly how dangerous they were, the mushroom had gone over the top.

It was not a bluff.

From what her Hydra senses could perceive, Alexandra could feel the mushroom really had the poison inside to justify the outside appearance.

Any normal human stupid enough to think it was a fine idea to accompany meat at lunch would suffer the surprise of his life before promptly joining Death.

Even for a Hydra Animagus, it was likely this mushroom would give her unpleasant indigestion.

Alas for the mushroom, the Ravenclaw Champion had need of it, or rather her accomplices had acquiesced to her reasonable demands as long as she delivered a few into their custody.

"I just wish they could grow by the dozens, not in ones or twos," the Champion of the Morrigan said aloud, after throwing the aforementioned mushroom into her enchanted basket. "It is close to midnight now, and I rather wish to go to my bed instead of playing mushroom-hunter for Fred and George."

Unfortunately, the mushrooms in question proved elusive. She had to move on quite a distance each time to find what she wanted. And this was with her having the senses of an Animagus. How the hell did the Twins manage to find anything when they were young? Alexandra knew for sure the Marauder's Map wasn't useful when you went deep into the woods...

It took her a long time to find the required quantities of mushrooms her 'associates' had requested, but it was eventually done.

All in all, it was rather uneventful. The werewolf she had kicked the butt of at the beginning of the evening had been the only true danger, and a show of lightning had convinced the Lycanthrope to flee with its tail between its legs.

With the Ministry having killed most of the giant man-eating spiders, the Forbidden Forest was rather peaceful, all things considered.

Okay, it remained peaceful if you were a Hydra Animagus and the Champion of Death. Most predators caught her scent and decided that for tonight, they better hunt elsewhere.

In this, ironically, they were far more intelligent than plenty of humans.

Alexandra was casting Stasis and Preservation Charms when she acknowledged she had moved far away from her initial landing area.

She was back to the edge of the Forbidden Forest...but not anywhere near close to the western border.

No, this was the southern edge of the Forbidden Forrest, and what she had taken to be a huge clearing had to be the place where the Ministry had burned the Acromantulas' nest.

As she took some five steps in that direction, Alexandra could see the towers of Hogwarts, shining in the obscurity.

"Oh, look," Alexandra snickered, "another massive hole into the defences of Hogwarts."

There was a massive rock, probably some early attempt at a statue that was abandoned by a student there decades ago to serve as an improvised observation post.

It was enough for Alexandra to sit there and observe.

There were no real defences in sight.

Oh, the power of Hogwarts' wards could be felt, a mere three hundred or four hundred metres away.

But it was clear that the wards were the only shield the Order of the Phoenix relied upon.

There was nothing else that could be seen from here.

"I know the Forbidden Forrest can be dangerous, but come on, plenty of students have survived it without too much trouble, Dumbledore. And yet you rely on an enemy not having the guts to go through the woods and avoid the rest of your traps? This is incredibly sloppy."

Seriously, the moment there was an opportunity to exploit, be it a noticeable weakness **in** the wards or something else, the Champion of Hogwarts could be in front of Hogwarts' great doors in one hundred seconds.

Add a broom and a few tools, and the battle would be inside the halls of the school before you could say 'Basilisk'.

For a few seconds, Alexandra felt the temptation to challenge the Defeater of Grindelwald and prove his incompetence in military affairs to the whole world.

It didn't last. Was it the Power of Chaos speaking or something else?

The Lady Protector didn't know, but there was a fine line between audacity and stupidity, and here it would go way past the red line.

Hogwarts was garrisoned and defended by a bunch of amateurs; the last thing she needed was to convince them to begin thinking clearly and grow into competent wizards and witches.

Moreover, what would be the point? At the moment, Dumbledore was doing a fine job controlling Amos Diggory and all the senile fools that flocked under his banner. And the de facto Headmaster of the castle did it in a calm and peaceful manner...which also happened to be ridiculously ineffective against the Ministry of Lady Amelia Bones.

If the former Chief Warlock was removed, it was likely the potential opposition would splinter and decide to be more aggressive and efficient. They could hardly be *more* inefficient than they were right now, at any rate!

"I'm beginning to see why so many politicians want an outside enemy to take the blame...it is far easier to have those foes when you want to change plenty of laws at once."

And then her inner animal warned her of a danger.

Instinctively, Alexandra transformed her skin under her black travelling cloak, so that she had impenetrable black-and-gold scales to protect herself.

About thirteen of her heartbeats later, an arrow flew into the air.

The Dark Champion – for a few more days, she was of Darkness – caught the projectile without looking at it.

"Pathetic," she noted. "No poison, a mere arrow? You couldn't possibly think it was going to work, did you?"

"Mars is bright, tonight."

Alexandra laughed.

"I think you mistake the Red Planet for the Moon...Centaurs."

Indeed, this was a group of some thirty four-legged beings who had mustered at the edge of the forest. All were armed with large bows.

"You have no place in this sacred forest, *abomination*. Leave, and never return."

The Champion of Death giggled.

"This sacred forest, as you call it, is the ancient battleground of the Plains of Camlann. This forest was born of Death, Centaurs. And here I thought you were supposed to be intelligent..."

"Our intelligence is far above those of humans!" one of the larger Centaurs proclaimed. "We have seen what will happen in the stars, and we alone will survive the End!"

That sounded...interesting. Had the Centaurs, out of all intelligent species of Earth, really forged something that could keep Apophis at bay?

"And how do you intend to do that?"

"We will leave no city for abominations to raze, and no sign of subjugation for monsters like you to track us! We will be the Masters of the Enchanted Woods, and the only sign we will be given of us will be our arrows into your flesh!"

Alexandra stared at them.

They couldn't be serious, right?

Oh, no.

They were serious.

The Hydra Animagus hissed and as her throat transformed, it became hysterical laughter.

"Seriously? You intend to rely upon the Power of Ignorance to protect you from the Great Enemy?"

"Stop laughing, bipedal abomination!"

Several more arrows were launched.

This time Alexandra avoided them entirely, only grabbing the two most dangerous ones before breaking them like they were cheap toys.

"I call you for the fools you are," the Champion of Death spoke acidly. "Only imbeciles would try something as stupid as shooting arrows if you know a tenth of my abilities. And since your lack of intelligence is particularly stunning, I suppose you have also made a pact with Albus Dumbledore?"

"Unlike you, the white-bearded human has the foresight and the wisdom to let the Centaurs claim the Enchanted Woods!"

"A claim is only as strong as the ones supposed to defend it," Alexandra retorted unimpressed. "Where was all this courage when you had Acromantulas spreading in the woods?"

"Leave and do not return, abomination! Albus Dumbledore will be informed of your trespassing!"

Alexandra stretched her muscles and began channelling magic through her arms.

"That would be a great feat, because Dumbledore has many prodigious abilities, but he's no Necromancer."

Many beings would have understood it as the threat that if you didn't desist, the garrison of Hogwarts would need the blessings of Death to interrogate your souls.

But the Centaurs weren't that clever.

They shot more arrows.

"Now ordinarily, I would get out and forget the entire affair," Alexandra said coldly. "But I recently learned that some four-legged monsters kidnapped women from a village not far from it. You wouldn't know anything about it, would you, *half-breed*?"

"KILL HER!"

Alexandra had to restrain herself to ask what they thought they were doing, emptying their quivers of arrows left and right.

This was one of the more stupid skirmishes she'd fought, and the competition was high among them.

"Wingardium Leviosa." The Centaurs brayed in panic as their volleys suddenly were slammed back into their faces with extreme prejudice.

"So close to Hogwarts, better to avoid my favourite Lightning elemental spells, I think," the green-eyed witch commented idly. "Now where were we? Ah, yes! Dear centaurs, I'm afraid the Morrigan didn't appreciate at all certain parts of your recent actions. While my purpose tonight was definitely to grab a few mushrooms, it was also a test for you. If you didn't trouble me, I would likely have placed you at the bottom of my to-do-list. But now that you have so generously proclaimed yourselves stupider than humanity, I'm afraid I you have just volunteered for an unpleasant experience."

For the first time, plenty of the Centaurs whinnied in terror.

"I have very simple rules, and one of them is that you don't rape, Centaurs. Dumbledore may be ignorant of the problem, or he's unwilling to confront you as he is in dire need of allies. But I assure you I am more than willing to make sure you will never do it again."

"The stars say we are going to play a critical role in the Battle of the End!" a Centaur which had received two arrows in his equine body brayed. "Kill us, and you doom this world!"

"If you are really stupid enough to believe that," Alexandra hissed, "you and the Light really deserve to lie in the same grave."

**Author's note**: Some questions should never be answered. And some challenges should not be made when the opponent is Death.

The adventures of Alexandra Potter will continue in the next update, which will be titled Sixth Task.

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