**Chapter 108**

**The Unplanned Task**

**17 February 1995, the Conqueror’s Grave Island, north of Crete, Mediterranean Sea**

The answer from the Exchequer members waiting outside the island didn’t come.

It seemed that so close to the Conqueror’s Grave, modern magical communications entirely stopped functioning.

“It must be the sheer power taken from the island’s magic,” Eleonora suggested.

“Who cares?” Romeo Malatesti shrugged. “We have to solve the problem on our own. Think of it as...an additional Task for the Tournament?”

“Yeah, but the Tasks had Judges who made sure the challenges were feasible in the first place,” Alexandra raised an eyebrow. “Oh, and I suppose they engineered things so that not too many people died in front of the crowds.”

Needless to say, on an island far from any non-magical settlement, the Potter Heiress doubted the same ‘rules’ applied there.

“But let’s begin by the basics,” the Champion of Ravenclaw continued, “I doubt this gate is made of bronze; if it was the case, Chaos here would have shattered it. What it is?”

Eleonora da Riva took a step forwards, and joined her hands into a prayer-like gesture. Instantly, a pulse of Light magic echoed across their surroundings. For the city as a whole, it had no effect whatsoever.

For the gate blocking their way, the same thing couldn’t be said.

It was as if a thousand artists had thrown paint buckets on the gate.

It went from bronze to red, from red to blue, from blue to green, from green to gold.

When it stopped, the vision was...spectacular. The metal the Light spell had revealed was...difficult to describe. It was as if someone had imprisoned a shimmering rainbow inside a mirror-like substance and it shone so much that there were vibes of diamonds and gold, but...more perfect, if it was possible.

One thing was sure, it was a magical metal.

“As I suspected,” the Champion of Innocence grimly said. “This gate is made of Orichalcum.”

“The name is familiar-“ Malatesti intervened.

Lyudmila Romanov snickered.

“It should be, if you’ve taken your classes seriously...that’s in general something every school reserves a few hours near the end of a student’s scholarship inside their halls.”

“And for those who aren’t near the end of their scholarship?” Alexandra asked politely.

“It’s basically the Alchemists’ Mastery of Mastery,” the Dark Queen replied. “Seven different components are combined with each other, with the rumour gold and diamond are involved...and at the end, by long and highly complicated Alchemy rituals, the metals and the reagents are ‘sublimated’ into a new Alchemical metal that has near-divine properties...Orichalcum. I must tell you that I didn’t expect anyone to create something as ridiculous as a gate made out of it.”

“And for good reason,” Eleonora shook her head, “most Alchemists who manage to reach the skill level necessary to create pure Orichalcum prove it by showing to their peers a few grams of Orichalcum.”

“A few grams?” Alexandra echoed, eyes widening. There was no way the gate in front of them could weigh less than several hundred kilograms, and it was certainly a mass which would be measured in tons, depending on the thickness of the gate...

“A few grams, yes. And even this small amount of Orichalcum is worth a lot.” Eleonora gave a despairing glance to the Alchemy-forged gate. “That much Orichalcum in a single place is worth so much that I doubt even Ra or Osiris could pay us the gold to buy if we put it on sale.”

Romeo Malatesti howled in laughter.

“Maybe that’s the reward for anyone who manages to break through this gate?”

“Don’t be stupid.” All signs of humour had disappeared from the Champion of Loki’s expression. “This is Orichalcum. The Alchemical metal is famous for being near-indestructible, and the few instances where legendary mages were able to exploit its rare flaws were highly unusual. And what’s worse...there is no sign of opening. The gate was forged as an Orichalcum big slab, which was shut down when the grave was closed over two millennia ago.”

“We would have to be inside to be fully sure,” Eleonora amended, nodding when the Dark Queen’s turned her eyes in her direction, “but you’re more likely right.”

“In that case,” Alexandra sighed, “I humbly suggest I try it my way.”

“And what is your way, Death?”

“We treat it like the ugly ‘metallic slab’ it is, of course. WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!”

The Levitation Charm for a second didn’t work, and of course a certain Champion of War chuckled.

“That’s never going to-“

Then as her magic continued to pour into the incantation, the gate began to be lifted. One millimetre. Two. Damn it, what was this metal made of? It was easier to lift a Dreadnought!

“Some help,” the Champion of Death gritted her teeth while focusing on channelling her magic into her new magical wand, “would be appreciated...”

More levitation spells were shouted, and little by little, the Orichalcum Gate began to soar. It was now a few centimetres of colossal effort, but-

“PROTEGO MAXIMA!”

There was a monumental...it was like there was a gigantic tornado of flames, and the four Champions had to protect themselves immediately, stopping their Levitation Charms...and as a consequence, the gate slammed down in a thunderous sound.

“That was a good idea,” Eleonora conceded after she cleaned up the dust of her robes, “but it seems that-“

The Champion of Innocence went silent, as behind them, the entire city seemed to come to life. Or rather the statues of this city were coming to life. And they weren’t the only ones. In some of the tortuous alleys, many of them that they hadn’t bothered to search too hard, enormous secret passages were opened, revealing dozens of hoplite enchanted armours marching to war.

It was an army, the first line of defence of this tomb.

And it was marching towards them...

“I’m going to deal with them,” the Champion of War declared with one of his usual bloodthirsty grins.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Eleonora countered. “You’re just going to throw your life away.”

“These animated armours of Ancient Macedon aren’t made of Orichalcum!” Romeo Malatesti replied, annoyed.

“The armours, no,” the Dark Queen’s eyes narrowed, “but seeing how shiny the pikes are under the sun, the tip of their weapons is certainly made of Orichalcum, and if it is, they can bypass an Animagus’ skin, no matter how impossible it should be. We must hurry, I don’t fancy our chances-“

“Especially,” Eleonora added, “that I think we have found what happened to those potential thieves who ended up on this island by mistake...and who hadn’t the blessings of Champions to protect them.”

“They have masks shaped to look like they are all Alexander returned to life.”

“And if we removed them, I think we all see a lot of faces frozen in agony.” The only Champion of the Light to be present glared at the Champion of Ares. “We must hurry!”

“I fully agree, but what do you expect me to do?” Lyudmila Romanov growled. “Give me a few weeks, and I will likely find something to bypass the Orichalcum, but-“

And immediately, Alexandra knew what had to be done. It was something she had done several times...there was a door, but nothing stopped you from creating your own.

“I have something simpler.” Alexandra gave a glance to the thousands of hoplites coming to kill them, before looking at her fellow Champion of the Dark. “Do you have a spell powerful enough to drill the mountain?”

Lyudmila looked at her like she had grown a second head.

“I have, but what do you-“

“There is a gate, but nothing says we have to use it.” The younger of the Four Champions explained. “And while Alexander and his Empire may have been talented enough to forge an Orichalcum gate, I very much doubt they could create walls of Orichalcum for the walls and the rest of the boundaries of the entire tomb.”

“That...that is so crazy it could work!” Malatesti began to laugh again...just the hoplites began to really climb the streets of the city at a brisk pace.

“We are going to have to be careful, if we bring the mountain down upon our heads-“

“We will likely bring it down upon the entire army of hoplites coming for us,” Alexandra finished the sentence of the Champion of Innocence.

“I like it.” Lyudmila then uttered about twenty words in a language that was certainly not Norse. It sounded...musical.

It sounded like dissonance and a song of sorrow.

And then from the Champion of Chaos’ wand, an ungodly amount of power erupted.

In the days to come, when recounting it, Alexandra would describe it as a ‘magma torch’. It was one of the best descriptions she could give, and yet it fell far from doing it complete justice.

One thing was sure, the mountain shrieked and rocks began to fall.

The earth rumbled under their feet.

But a breach was created, metre after metre, and after a terrifying explosion, the rocks cede to reveal an enchanted construction which had been built by human hands...and which ceded in mere seconds when they all cast offensive spells at it.

“RUN!”

The hoplites were almost here, though they remained out of range for the weapons of a proper phalanx...or they would have been out of range, if the air didn’t begin to be filled with arrows.

“INTO THE MOUNTAIN, OR WE’RE ALL DEAD!”

More defences began to activate. Spells the like that were rarely seen even during the European Magical Tournament were hurled in their direction as magical towers revealed themselves in blazing columns of Light magic.

The four Champions ran.

Something incredibly powerful struck the rocks right above the breach they had just created.

The earth rumbled, and the noise was so loud it seemed the entire world was collapsing.

And then there was only the darkness.

**17 February 1995, 10 Downing Street, London, England**

It was an unpleasant law in politics that you were often forced to work with other politicians that you didn’t like.

The Prime Minister had long assimilated it before entering Downing Street.

But there was having bad feelings for someone, and then there was realising the other politician you were speaking with was a moron.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the so-called ‘Minister of Magic’ Cornelius Fudge fell into the latter category, not the former.

In fact, the more words came out of his mouth, the more the Prime Minister understood why the winner of the Westminster Bridge’s had declared openly there was going to be a vote of no confidence against him soon.

The British politician wouldn’t have trusted this fumbling, arrogant bumbling fool to go buy milk at the corner of the street. That he was the highest elected magical representative said very sad things about what was happening on the other side of the ‘sorcery barrier’...

“This is outrageous!”

“No, Mister Fudge,” the Prime Minister replied icily, “it is a matter of justice. We have all the evidence we need to prove that Mister Leo Black, or Galahad, as he obviously prefer to be called, killed ninety-two citizens of this country, in addition to wounding severely hundreds of others.”

“But those were only-“

Even a buffoon like Fudge caught himself in time...though in many ways, it was too late.

Several times in this conversation, Fudge had called him and his security service ‘Muggles’, and the contempt behind the word, not to say the word itself, had been barely hidden.

“They were citizens of this nation, and the man who killed them will face justice.” If he didn’t do his utmost to achieve it, the Prime Minister would not be able to look himself in the glass...and half of London was going to muster in front Downing Street to have his head. And the members of his own party would deliver. With the chaos brought by the return of magic, it was almost certain his party and himself were out of power, but if the criminal responsible for this atrocity wasn’t arrested and judged, his days in power would be measured in weeks at best, in hours at worst.

“No!” Fudge blustered, his hands continuously playing with his ridiculous green hat. “Proper wizards aren’t part of your jurisdiction. Alexandra Potter and Leo Black will be tried before the Wizengamot, as they broke the Statute of Secrecy and-

“Are you serious?” the Prime Minister had so far let the moron speak, for everything uttered was as much priceless information given – or at least as much priceless information that could be deciphered from an incompetent wizard’s ramblings. “One of your own...mage-citizens killed ninety-two people, and you are concerned about *secrecy*?”

“Yes, this is-“

“I’m beginning to wonder if for this conversation, I shouldn’t have invited Miss Alexandra Potter. She seems to have a far better idea of how magical and non-magical societies should interact.”

And the teenager would likely have no problem letting her enemy face justice.

But the words weren’t said just as a pessimistic comment. They were bait.

And predictably, Fudge took it magnificently.

“OUT OF THE QUESTION!” The ‘Minister of Magic’ shouted. “This Dark Witch is guilty of unspeakable crimes! She has cast the evilest of magics-“

“By contrast with her opponent, who cast ‘Light Magic’ to kill ninety-two men, women, and children, you mean?”

“Yes!” Fudge answered instinctively, before realising what he had just said. “I mean, no! Yes! No!”

There really was something wrong with a nation when a buffoon could claim the title of Minister...for the sake of Britain, the Prime Minister really hoped Downing Street would never have to tolerate the presence of an idiot of that magnitude.

“Here is what is going to happen.” This time there was no conciliation or any trace of courtesy in his voice. “You are going to lead us to where Mister Black-Galahad is healed, and we are going to formally arrest him for the murder of ninety-two citizens, along with a long list of crimes that is coming to light with every hour of investigation. You are also going to lead us to the location where his chief accomplice, one...Albus Dumbledore, is it? Yes, you are going to help the authorities of this country arrest him.”

“You’re not serious...this is...this is Albus Dumbledore we’re speaking about!”

Hmm...clearly the man must have been somehow important to Fudge. Another politician? A financial backer supporting Fudge’s electoral campaigns?

“I don’t care if he was Merlin the Great or Arthur reborn!” The Prime Minister couldn’t help but let annoyance colour his voice for a brief moment. “What happened on Westminster Bridge will see all culprits punished! All of them, Mister Fudge!”

Predictably, the ‘wizard’ drew his...apparently, it was called formally a ‘magical wand’...and a redoubtable weapon.

“You are Muggles! You neither have the right nor the magic to make demands of-“

This was when the rubber bullets of his Security Service’s guns opened fire, and while they were at the other end of the room, they were excellent shooters.

Plenty of them hit Cornelius Fudge in the arm carrying the weapon, as well as his chest.

The ‘Minister of Magic’ let his weapon fall from his fingers between loud groans in pain...and then collapsed like a bag of potatoes.

“Oh, and I’m also considering arresting you.” The Prime Minister added with a small dose of British irony.

“I don’t think he’s able to hear you, Sir.”

“Indeed? What a pity.” The Prime Minister sighed internally before turning towards the representatives of a secretive unit he had yet to know the name of. “Please send another invitation, gentlemen. The conversation with Mister Fudge had an outcome that was...less than optimal. Let’s see if the second most important figure of his government is more willing to hear reason.”

**17 February 1995, the Conqueror’s Grave**

If Alexandra had been with her friends, she would have made a sarcastic comment about them having not the choice anymore, they had to face the darkness of the Moria.

But her friends weren’t here, and once the rocks had stopped falling and they were sure they were not going to be impaled by some trap, the same spell was uttered by four different wands.

“Lumos!”

Slowly, the dust that had been released ceased to block their vision, and the Champions of Magic could admire the entrance of the tomb of Alexander of Macedon.

It was, as one could imagine, something incredible, worthy of the King of Egopolis. The huge circular hall had been entirely built with marble. There was blue marble for the large pillars, gold for the frescoes on top of it, which of course had been carved to tell to everyone the exploits of the Conqueror. There were more statues, and surprisingly, most of them were of horses...or more exactly, they were all representations of a single horse, the legendary Bucephalus.

It had to have cost a fortune and the number of artists hired for the task must have not been small...but after everything they had seen so far, what were a few more arms and hands, right?

“I was right, by the way,” Lyudmila spoke as Eleonora cast an incantation which saw the hall be illuminated as if they were under daylight. “The Orichalcum Gate was never supposed to open.”

That was certainly true...the Alchemical metal had not been hidden under a bronze illusion on the inside – there was no point to it – but it was exactly identical to the current appearance they had received on the outside.

“It is always possible”, Romeo Malatesti began, “that there is an heirloom which-“

He stopped, as Alexandra’s wand cast a Finite Incantatem on the ‘normal’ floor section next to the ‘Gate’...revealing Ancient Runes shining in vicious red energies.

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.” Lyudmila smiled. “I’m not a specialist in Hieroglyphs. Are those what I think they are, Death?”

“Yes,” Alexandra was suddenly very, very relieved they hadn’t been able to levitate completely the Orichalcum until they could roll under it. “They are here to eviscerate any intruder. This one...would have burned us alive. This one...this one commands the descent...of these Orichalcum spikes. And this one...this one would have unleashed half a dozen Death Curses.”

“How much Orichalcum did Alexander have at its disposal?” Eleonora whispered. “It is getting utterly ridiculous!”

“That’s a good point,” Lyudmila nodded. “Where did this Orichalcum come from? We got a history of the Archmage’s wayward Apprentice, but there was no mention of him giving any Orichalcum to his troops. All his conquests were done without Alchemical metals, or at least not any highly valuable ones.”

“India,” the Champion of Ares told them. “He must have gotten it from India. What?” He added, as everyone turned towards him.

“Explain.”

“According to the legend,” the male Champion of the Scuola Regina said with a serious expression, “Alexander the Conqueror turned around when his men were tired from his endless wars, or because there was nothing left to conquer. But what if he didn’t stop his conquest because of that? Why if he did stop because the Indian mages offered him a tribute of Orichalcum?”

“That...that could explain things, all right,” the Champion of the Morrigan acknowledged. “Of course, I admit I don’t know much about the various magical civilisations of India. I’ve been given a brief history of recent magical practises from Mysore, courtesy of my ICW liaison, but...”

Apparently, the three other Champions were no better off in that regard. And to be clear, this was not an insult to the Indian wizard and witches, it was just that India was really far away from Europe, even after long-range methods of transports were developed.

But even if she had the Patil Twins here ready to answer her questions, Alexandra wasn’t sure it would have been useful. The Conqueror’s wars had been a long time ago, the India of today was not the India which existed before the Roman Empire dominated the Mediterranean.

“This is a mystery that can wait another day,” the Champion of Innocence shook her head, and turned around. The three Champions of the Dark followed her, giving last looks to the Orichalcum Gate before concentrating on more serious issues.

“But it confirms the fact this tomb was never intended to have any visitors, be it to keep the grave in good condition or to give a challenge to adventurers and tomb raisers.” Alexandra remarked darkly.

You didn’t seal a grave with an Orichalcum gate if you wanted someone to admire the decorations. There were far cheaper traps if you wanted to do that.

“Why the unconvinced tone, Death?”

“You have seen the number of statues outside, Chaos. The tomb was built on the orders of a man whose ego could give a good challenge to Ra’s. Does a man with enough ambition to conquer everything from Greece to India sound like the kind of being who would accept his tomb to fade into obscurity?”

“No,” Lyudmila Romanov admitted as they passed between series after series of marble columns.

The columns suddenly stopped, and they passed below a massive triumphal arch – guess whose exploits and grandiose proclamations had been kept here for the future generations?

The Champions expected new traps, but none did come.

It was only when they clearly left the first hall and the neighbouring avenue to enter the second that the atmosphere brutally changed.

The pillars and decorations remained clearly Macedonian-Greek, but they were almost modest.

And now half of the room was an abyss of darkness.

Really, there was only a large bridge to descend further into the grave.

The rest was just a massive pit.

“There are a lot of enchantments above it to keep anyone from flying, levitating, or bringing a magical carpet,” the Dark Queen commented after casting a few spells in the air.

“We could still conjure ropes or something, if the bridge proves a trap.” Romeo Malatesti suggested.

Alexandra looked deep into the darkness...and grimaced.

“No, no we can’t.” She whispered in answer. “And please lower your voice. There’s a Styx Viper at the bottom.”

“Ah.”

Yes, ah. The Parthenon had a big one guarding the Erechtheion, but compared to this one, it was a baby. Even with her Hydra eyes, comparison was difficult due to the magic saturating the pit, but the monster looked as big as the Basilisks she had killed in second year.

“I could slay it.” The green chaotic eyes of Lyudmila were visibly eager for the challenge.

“There is a second one on the other side of the bridge, and there are also large tunnels going...somewhere.” Eleonora whispered calmly. “This mountain must have hidden underground lakes where the monsters can feed. And where there are two, there may be others.”

This calmed considerably the Dark Queen’s enthusiasm. Four Champions against a huge Styx Viper, whether the latter had some surprise capacities, was dangerous but doable. Four Champions against two Styx Vipers doubled the danger, and began to risk grave casualties if something went horribly wrong, or the big snakes had been bred with lethal abilities they weren’t ready to face.

But if they were more Styx Vipers? There was a very high likelihood of several of them dying in the fight.

And no, Alexandra had a feeling that Parseltongue was not the solution. The Vipers were way too big, they wouldn’t be intimidated by a Lernaean Hydra...and they could have been trained to guard the Conqueror’s Grave, in which case intimidation was going to be seen as a preliminary for a fight to the death.

“Okay, we don’t attack the monsters.”

“Let’s see the positive side of the affair,” Alexandra smiled, “we are in the right location. With Alexander’s ego and his temptation to rally the Exchequer’s side, there aren’t that many wizards who had the reach and the connections to grab a few Styx Vipers and use them as tomb’s guardian.”

“But the bridge is entirely carved with Runes, including Hieroglyphs,” the Champion of Ares was prompt to give them the bad news to ‘compensate’ for this short-lived enthusiasm. “And I am ready to bet half of my House’s wealth that they are Orichalcum spikes ready to descend the moment we’re in the middle of the bridge.”

“If the Orichalcum blades don’t kill you,” Eleonora commented, “the explosions of the Rune onslaught will. And if it doesn’t, the bridge is more likely going to disappear, letting you fall into the pit, where the Styx Vipers will have been alerted by the detonations.”

“A good thing the Judges haven’t been invited here,” the Potter Heiress noted, “it would have given them unpleasant ideas for the Tournament.”

“But the reverse is also true,” Lyudmila said. “The methods used in the Second Task can be of use here.”

“Methods...you think it is possible to create a bridge of ice to go over the pit?” Alexandra said slowly. “That’s going to be...difficult.” Difficult and exhausting, honestly. The pit had to be...thirty to forty metres long? And they had to conjure enough ice to let one wizard and three witches pass...not to mention it would have to be stable until they returned...

“The ice bridge can’t go over the pit. It has to go over the bridge itself, otherwise the traps will all activate.” The Dark Queen spoke coldly. “And we have to keep it stable without any ice fragments falling, or the spikes and other unpleasant surprises will fall upon our heads.”

“Okay, that’s going to be extremely difficult.”

“Yes. But does anyone have a better plan?”

No one had, and so the Champions went to work.

**17 February 1995, somewhere near Venice, Magical Republic of Venice**

“The Champions have found it. They have found the entrance of Alexander’s Grave, and opened it, my Queen.”

Morgane Rys’Ygraine Avalon raised her eyebrows. The Exchequer messenger’s anxious expression was not one that would be normally associated with good news.

“And doing so, they have activated an army of enchanted hoplite armours, in addition to all the statues of Alexandropolis and some...formidable defences.”

Ah yes, that explained the lack of cheers.

“Since I do not expect subordinates to rush complaining at the first part of a plan going wrong, I’m going to assume a long-range destruction ritual was insufficient to deal with that annoyance.”

“Yes, my Queen. The army was entirely rebuilt within minutes of our ritual’s end.”

That sounded quite impressive. Even today, that kind of things was beyond the ability of many Bishops of their organisation to create.

“And there is something that was never anticipated. Many of the weapons of these enchanted armours, as well as the Gate of Alexander’s Grave, are made of Orichalcum.”

“What?”

Morgane was a Vampiri Romani and shock did not come to her easily, after one thousand and five hundred years of existence, but in this instance she wasn’t able to hide her consternation.

“There is no doubt possible, my Queen. I checked in person...there is more Orichalcum on this island than we ever thought possible.”

And as the description of the ‘Orichalcum Gate’ was given, it was hard not to shake her head in disbelief. And that was on top of many weapons having their tips made of the Alchemical creation!

“How is it possible?” The legendary sorceress hissed angrily. “Alexander stole Darius’ treasury, but it gave him only half a kilogram of Orichalcum with it! And the rumours the Indian rulers bribed him with Orichalcum have always been that, unconfirmed rumours!”

“I...I must admit my ignorance, my Queen.”

Morgane huffed before leashing her anger. It wasn’t the fault of the messenger. She didn’t know, and her knowledge on this bloody era of war and mayhem was far superior to any Rook and Pawn, courtesy of her long life. It would be completely unfair to blame her subordinate.

It left a question, though.

“If the Gate is made of Orichalcum, how did the Champions manage to enter it?”

“After an unsuccessful attempt to levitate it out of the way, the Champion of Chaos drilled an entirely new opening into the mountain, bypassing it entirely.”

Morgane chuckled.

“I sense the Champion of Death’s ingenuity behind the idea.”

“Err...yes, my Queen. Anyway, the opening was far from stable, and combined with the counterattack of the Grave’s defences, it was rapidly buried under tons of rock. I fear that if the Champions want to get out, they will have to drill a new exit out of the mountain.”

On that point, she wasn’t exactly worried.

“They will. And if they don’t manage to disable the artefacts or rituals that animate the hoplite armours, you will have to be ready to open them a way.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

There was more, the vampire sorceress could feel it.

“Speak your mind.”

“With due respect, my Queen, the more I study this island, the more I worry this is not just Alexander’s Grave. The more I watch, the more defences are revealed...the more I fear this is a *prison*, not a mere tomb with an abundance of traps.”

And it would be coherent with certain unconfirmed rumours, that...no, it was useless to speculate about it now.

“You may be right.” The Queen of the Exchequer declared bluntly. “Alas, we can’t exactly warn the Champions of your hypothesis. For all we know...” she bared her fangs, “they may have discovered it at the moment we speak.”

**17 February 1995, the Conqueror’s Grave**

Fortunately, the plan had worked. They had been able to build a bridge of ice over the trapped one, and walked over it without triggering any trap.

They had also been able to stabilise it with Runes and other classical methods, so they wouldn’t have to build a second one on their way out.

Which was...a relief, really. The Conqueror’s Grave was really, really giving her bad vibes.

Alexandra hoped dearly it was her imagination, but she had the depressing feeling it wasn’t.

They went deeper into Alexander’s tomb. The stairs were of marble, as usual, but the differences of height between each block didn’t seem to have been made for humans. And it was the descent. The Ravenclaw Champion knew that when they would have to go back, it would be a significant climb.

There were no traps, but since they had to be at all times on their guard, this in a way increased the oppressing atmosphere.

“The theme is changing,” Romeo Malatesti said, as several enchanted torches began to be set aflame with Rune activations when they approached. “Before, I would have said there were only Greek or Macedonian columns, but now it looks like we have a Persian theme.”

“Persian...and Zoroastrian,” Lyudmila commented. “You see these burning symbols? Those are the representations of the Eternal Flame of Atar, one of the key symbols of Zoroastrianism.”

“You seem to have found an interest in it,” Alexandra commented neutrally.

“One of their core beliefs is free will,” the Dark Queen said in an amused voice. “There’s more to it than that, of course. Souls are eternal, and once we die, we are going to be judged for all our actions, good and bad.”

“Interesting,” the Champion of Death nodded.

“Then you will love that,” the Russian witch’s smile grew wider, “the fire was a symbol of the divine, and it was to be carefully maintained. Zoroastrian teachings told of an eternal war between the Light and the Darkness, between Good and Evil. And it incited all its disciples to accomplish good actions.”

The stairs stopped, and a new avenue, richly decorated with white and blue birds over pink marble, offered itself to their eyes.

“Really interesting,” Alexandra cleared her throat, “there are a lot of inscriptions on the walls. Are you able to guess their purpose?”

“Somewhat?” The Champion of Durmstrang frowned. “It looks like several were...damaged...and here someone clearly tried to write over the former carvings...very unprofessional, for the tomb of a King. Let’s see...they speak of a Trial of...Mortality? Or a Trial for the Mortals?”

“That doesn’t mean any sense,” a certain Champion of Ares complained.

“On the contrary,” Alexandra replied, “the Styx Vipers are often associated as a living symbol of Death.”

“Trial of the Mortal, Trial of the Mage, Trial of the Conquest...that’s what we apparently did a few minutes ago,” the Dark Queen continued with an expression of extreme determination, “and now we have to face...the Trial of the King, the Trial of the Demigod, the Trial of the Royal Mage?”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Eleonora da Riva grimaced. “Any ideas what it might be?”

“Certainly something vaguely linked to the Zoroastrian theme, no?” Alexandra proposed. “I mean, the first Styx Vipers were found in Greece millennia ago.”

There was a short debate, all the while they continued to walk.

Finally, they entered a new hall, one where evidently a lot of gold Zoroastrian-themed decorations proclaiming the glory of Alexander the Great awaited them.

Seriously, how many cities and fortresses must have been looted to build this megalomaniac dream?

The good news was...there was no pit, or any hole susceptible to send them in a pit filled with impaling spikes.

The bad news was...for all that this perfectly circular vast room left an enormous amount of empty space devoid of space, Alexandra could almost taste the danger in the air.

There was something here...they just couldn’t see it.

It was only when they had crossed half of the room that they found it. Far, far above their heads, almost invisible despite all the enchanted torches illuminating this new ‘trial room’, there was a vast circle of Orichalcum.

And one half began to shine in gold magic, while the other burst in dark light.

“MOVE!” Alexandra shouted.

This was just in time, as a colossal mass hit the centre of the hall...which now in fact could be considered an arena.

The ground trembled as the monster stood.

It was...tall. Easily twice the size of Malatesti, and the Champion of Ares was a tall young man. It had a vaguely bipedal appearance...immediately altered by the manifestation of four enormous arms, two gold, two dark.

“You have to be kidding me...” the Potter Heiress heard the Dark Queen growl in anger, “Alexander the Conqueror brought a damned *Daeva* to guard his corpse?”

“**The one you call Alexander defeated me**,” eyes of flames appeared to pierce their very souls, while great horns emerged from its skulls. “**And therefore I am bound to obey his commands**.”

Alexandra didn’t like that at all. The first thing she didn’t like was that this opponent was visibly intelligent...and the second part was that to speak of the King of Macedon, the past tense wasn’t used.

“And what is this command?”

A maw about half the size of a Basilisk’s opened, revealing the blades of darkness that some other species would have called ‘fangs’.

“**Only one of the Light and one of the Dark are to advance further**,” the Daeva proclaimed, “**the others must perish**!”

“Though the Zoroastrians worshipped them as fallen Gods, Daevas are not truly immortal,” Lyudmila Romanov gave them a carnivorous grin, before Gungnir appeared in her right hand. “In opposition to humans, their souls are bound to their bodies, no matter how much damage they are forced to endure.”

The Daeva didn’t enjoy these words...at all.

“**A Champion of Chaos...your soul may be safe, but your magic will be an excellent way to satiate my thirst**!”

“Out of the way, Death, War, and Innocence. This one is mine!”

Even if Alexandra had wished to protest, there was no time as thousands of fire arrows suddenly fell upon them like a deadly rain.

And the presence of so many torches here was suddenly revealed as the temperature grew infernally hot.

All the Hydra Animagus could do was to shield herself, because for all the vast arena, there was nowhere to evade.

There was no time to think, it was shield after shield, counter after counter, and blasting apart as many torches as they could.

It was a hurricane of violence and fire, and suddenly, the walls began to advance, the arena was getting shorter, and the light and the dark magic in the ceiling seemed to pour more fire-

And then it stopped.

There was an immense flash, and a sensation of...loss. Like something incredibly important had just faded away.

Alexandra look at the centre of the room...and saw Lyudmila Romanov standing triumphant, her right hand wielding Gungnir, and the left holding effortlessly the decapitated head of the Daeva.

“So I am now a Queen and a Demigod,” the Dark Queen’s arrogance was back, assuming it had ever left. Standing upon the monumental corpse in a triumphant pose, the Champion of Durmstrang, covered in dark and golden ichor, looked indeed like a War Queen. “What do you think?”

A thunderous sound echoed, and suddenly the walls resumed their progression. Worse, countless Runes on the ceiling began to activate...

“I think we have to run!”

And Alexandra had already begun doing so before finishing speaking. Unsurprisingly, the other Champions had imitated her incredibly fast...

**17 February 1995, somewhere near Venice**

The world was going mad, and there was nothing Gilderoy Lockhart or anyone could do.

Each hour seemed to bring more disastrous revelations and global chaos. In China, several large rivers had turned into blood. New jungles were growing at an accelerated rate in Pakistan, swallowing entire cities and other human-made infrastructure. In the United States, an entire mountain range had been summoned out of nowhere just west of the Mississippi. In the Indian Ocean and the Philippines Sea, strange cities were resurfacing from the depths, and with them came prehistoric sea monsters.

And the British-born spy knew those events were just the most spectacular headlines. There were hundreds, no, thousands of minor magical events occurring across the world hour after hour.

Both worlds, the magical and non-magical, were in chaos.

Following the Battle of Westminster Bridge, several ambitious wizards and witches had decided the time was right to fulfil their ambitions, and launched coups against their governments. At least seven different ‘Ministries of Magic’ had fallen, and it didn’t even count Russia where the Tsar had outright *executed* the Russian Minister to remind his court where the true power lied.

Wizards or not, there were tens of millions of souls seriously panicking, doing things that would have been properly unconscionable days ago.

Hell, Gilderoy had heard that thousands of inhabitants of London had decided to establish a Death Cult, in the hope it would convince its Champion to protect them!

The sad part was that Gilderoy felt that given the sheer incompetence of a certain Cornelius Fudge, gambling on Alexandra Potter and Death to protect you was certainly not a bad idea.

And in the mean time-

There was a distant shriek.

There were...whispers in the wind.

And then there were two brilliant flashes, one of gold, one of darkness.

“By the claws of a Thunderbird, what-“

There was a column of fire, and the magical phenomenon ceased, courtesy of the red-cloaked ‘Wizzard’.

“Now this isn’t something you could expect to see every day.” Erasmus Rincewind said conversationally, his staff burning with white flames.

“What happened?” Gilderoy asked weakly to the man who like him, had been the Senior DADA teacher of Hogwarts.

“A Daeva,” the other man sighed, “a Daeva has just been killed. And when they are killed, those beings always leave a mess behind them. The last one perished during the War against Grindelwald, and let me tell you-“

“The time-freeze is receding! The area frozen in time is receding!”

The shouts and expressions of excitation were everywhere.

They were also completely right.

One by one, the objects and people...everything that had been frozen at the edge of the prison of time Venice was caught into were violently released.

“So a distortion of Light and Dark Magic combined in a single Curse can destabilise a Ritual, especially if the latter has not been correctly stabilised...that’s quite the revelation.” Rincewind grimaced.

Lockhart looked at him warily.

“There are thousands of people of Venice who are going to be freed from this trap.”

“There are millions of people we don’t have the means to evacuate,” the walking catastrophe that was known as the Butcher of Dresden retorted. “The deadline has been shortened from days to hours, and the plan to neutralise the Grail, whatever it is, is not here.”

The words made Gilderoy Lockhart in fear, for no matter how much the American spy tried to convince himself Rincewind was lying, it failed to convince his heard. The litany of disaster had not slowed down with that new event, it had accelerated, and this was an engine of destruction where there were no brakes to use.

“I’ve never been good in Arithmantic calculations, but I wouldn’t be surprised that by midnight, the distortion created by the death of the Daeva will touch the Plaza di San Marco. And then...”

“And then?”

“And then the Fate of our two worlds will be decided.”

**17 February 1995, the Conqueror’s Grave**

This time, Alexandra didn’t ask Lyudmila for the translation.

The Zoroastrian theme had quickly disappeared, and the Hieroglyphs had replaced the Persian decorations and scripts; thus the Ravenclaw could decipher the meaning of the messages herself.

This could have been good news.

It really wasn’t.

The whole thing was all about God, Godhood, divinity, and...yes, even a sequence of Runes that had to mean ‘Avatar’.

What was waiting for them was the ‘Trial of God’.

And here the Hydra Animagus had thought the King of Egopolis couldn’t show more arrogance with his tomb’s decoration...

But when they arrived on the belvedere of the third all, the four Champions’ first reaction was, temporarily of course, one of amusement.

“Crocodiles,” Alexandra rolled her eyes. “First the Styx Vipers, then the big lizards. If it wasn’t impossible, I would wonder if the Exchequer had not created the Second Task and triggered some Seals just to prepare us to this unscheduled Task.”

“I have to agree it’s a...strange coincidence,” Romeo Malatesti grunted.

“Don’t forget the trenches with lethal Potions,” Eleonora pointed out with a dark glare, no doubt having now unpleasant memories of the Third Task.

Yes, it was fortunate there weren’t any Roman or Venetian similarities here. Otherwise their sense of paranoia would go into overdrive.

“At least the first hypothesis is verified. There must be an underground lake under the Conqueror’s Grave, to make sure the Hetkoshu Crocodiles and the Styx Vipers would be able to reproduce and endure the ravages of time.”

“They must have resorted to cannibalism to survive,” the Champion of Innocence told her.

“Yes.” Alexandra frowned. “I suppose there must be some wards and Charms underwater, to make sure the different species were able to stay in the appropriate sections and not exterminate each other. Otherwise the Styx Vipers would have eaten everything.”

An adult Hetkoshu saurian was redoubtable, but it wasn’t dangerous enough to hold its own against the Vipers. Then again, few things were.

“That’s all well and good,” the Champion of Loki interrupted sarcastically what promised to be an interesting debate, “but could we turn to a more important issue? Like...how are we going to cross this lake?”

“Thank you Chaos...” Alexandra replied, trying to match the level of sarcasm of the older witch, “to be very honest, I was trying to avoid thinking about it.”

The first challenge had been incredibly dangerous, but easily bypassed when they combined their strength and their magical skills. The second challenge was even more so, and they hadn’t been able to find a clever stratagem out of it. If the Dark Queen of Durmstrang wasn’t so strong, it could have turned very, very badly for them. Now that she had been able to replay the ‘duel’ the Champion of Chaos had offered to the Daeva, Alexandra was confident she could have won. But not without transforming into her Hydra form...and perhaps not in time to stop the walls from grinding them into bloody paste.

But at least fighting the Daeva was doable, if extremely perilous in the short amount of time they were given.

There was nothing ‘doable’ in a short amount of time here.

The crocodile-filled lake was separated by two trenches of Potions which reeked of something extremely vile, and there were lines after lines of Hieroglyphs specially primed to detonate the moment you were close to them.

It was to the point you couldn’t pose a foot or a paw there without *something* disappearing into a colossal explosion.

And it wasn’t over. On each side of the lake, too far from even an improbable jump or an ice-conjured bridge, there were enchanted armours mounting guard atop miniature siege towers, and their weapons were crude ballistae. The obligatory Orichalcum tips were present for the bolts.

All of this would have been bad enough on its own right, because the Potions were randomly bursting high into miniature geysers without any warning, meaning you couldn’t just jump above the trench, even if ignoring the Runes had been an option. But there were also clouds of flesh-eater scarabs ‘patrolling’ from one air entry vent to another.

If they tried to conjure ropes or bridges here, they were likely going to be attacked relentlessly all the way by the carnivorous insects.

“I think,” the Dark Queen was the first to speak as they studied all the traps and the murderous dangers awaiting them, “that the first Potion trench is filled with the Dark Source of Thoth. It’s a Potion that was rumoured to be around when the Greeks besieged Troy. The Egyptians sold it by the hundreds of amphorae to Agamemnon and his troops so that they could secure their camps and not be thrown into the sea. But the recipe was lost when the Romans conquered Egypt.”

“Clearly,” Alexandra winced, “the Macedonian troops must have acquired it when they conquered the Land of Pharaohs centuries before that. What kind of horrible death does it inflict?”

“Let’s just say,” the Champion of Loki said, “that I am a Fenrir Animagus, and I really don’t want to be touched by a few drops of this Potion. And since we’re continuing on the good news, while I’m too far away to really examine what the second Potion trench on the other side of the lake is about, I can guess it is something promising something as bad...fall into the trench, and you will beg a long time for death to claim you.”

“Trial of God indeed...”

“Quite.”

This was...discouraging. And it was just what they could see, because by staying on the belvedere, none of the nasty things had yet been revealed. With her Hydra eyes, Alexandra could see there were more Hieroglyphs on the ceiling. It was certainly to conjure more spikes and other lethal weapons.

The logical stratagem would have been to transform into a Hydra, jump from the Belvedere to the lake, and battle the Hetkoshu Crocodiles like she had done in the Second Task, although this time it would be to the death, and there were no judges or spectators to reveal her tactics.

But the dark waters gave her an incredibly bad feeling. There weren’t just Hetkoshu Crocodiles waiting for them there, Alexandra was sure of it.

“There is a flaw...and an opportunity this time.”

Lyudmila snickered.

“Oh yes. And pray tell, what is this strategy which I didn’t think about?”

“Flying.” The Champion of Ares replied bluntly.

The jaw of Loki’s Chosen immediately snapped shut.

“There are anti-levitation wards and other things to force things like brooms to crash.” Alexandra pointed out after considering the problem from all angles.

“Yeah,” Romeo Malatesti gave her a roguish expression, “but they couldn’t forbid *natural flight*. Otherwise the flesh-eater scarabs wouldn’t be there to begin with.”

“Well, yes,” Eleonora spoke with a touch of exasperation. “But unless you forget something, those nasty insects will eat everything that is made of flesh...and that includes....oh.”

Ah.

Yeah, Romeo Malatesti had a Stymphalian Bird for Animagus form. And Stymphalian Birds were made of metal, not flesh. Flesh-eater scarabs were not a problem for him.

“You can likely fly over it, and if you’re fast enough, you might be able to avoid the bolts the enchanted hoplite armours will send your way, War.” Alexandra commented slowly. “But you are the only one capable of natural flight. Whatever awaits you beyond this hall, this would mean you would have to fight the next challenge alone.”

“There are supposed to be only three challenges, Mortal, Demigod, and God.”

The Champion of the Morrigan shook her head.

“If you think the King of Egopolis left his true tomb without a last challenge to prove he has become ‘more than a God’, you’re naive, War.”

“But I can make it easier, making sure we don’t lose hours here!”

Alexandra hesitated...and grimaced. Malatesti had a point, damn it. They didn’t know what happened outside, how many days and hours they had left to grab the Ark of the Covenant and bring it to Venice.

For the first time in a while, the green-eyed Ravenclaw wasn’t able to see a clear plan to victory, no matter how hard she tried...

“Lyudmila? Eleonora?”

The Dark Queen was the first to answer.

“If the goal is for all of us to fight our away across this lake, there’s not going to be any clever loophole to exploit...Alexandra. We will have to do it the hard way. We will blast apart all the crocodiles, scorch every Hieroglyph, and transfigure the Potion or find some way to neutralise its properties. I am confident that if we combine our strengths, we can do it. But we’re going to have to destroy most of the traps and defences before we’re able to throw a bridge there.”

“Eleonora?”

“I agree with her.”

Alexandra sighed.

“Malatesti, you have your chance. Make you sure we don’t regret it...because we certainly won’t arrive in time to save you if you send a message requesting reinforcements.”

Everything had been said.

The three female Champions left the Belvedere behind them, using the marble stairs to descend and face the dangers of the ‘Trial of God’.

And then they unleashed hell.

Lightning began to rain down, fire tides were unleashed at the ancient Hieroglyphs. The Power of Death and Chaos rose, and the Hetkoshu Crocodiles emerged by hundreds to kill them.

Alexandra transformed partially into her Animagus form – just enough to still be bipedal and keep her human limbs – and she began to attack relentlessly.

Torrents of blood filled the room, and the creations of Alexander the Great fought desperately to survive as a Stymphalian Bird flew like the prey bird it was towards the golden arch marking the hall’s exit.

**17 February 1995, the Last Hall, the Conqueror’s Grave**

Romeo Malatesti didn’t laugh as he ran, but he certainly felt the excitation and the pleasure of it.

At last, luck was smiling upon him.

At last, the Champion of Ares had a chance to accomplish his mission.

“Who knew the Conqueror was going to be so good as to give me this great favour?”

Just as the words left his mouth, more thunderous explosions came behind him, and even some dust fell everywhere in the great corridor.

“Better not to lose any time, though,” the Venetian student admitted out loud. “The two monsters aren’t going to be delayed very long by the ‘Trial of God’.”

If it came to a duel, Romeo thought he could win against Eleonora da Riva, but certainly not against the other two. Alexandra Potter would kill him in mere seconds. And the Dark Queen...well, there were unpleasant deaths, and there were things a Champion of Loki could do to your body and your soul. You took your own life before the latter happened to you.

All the reason to not dally and accomplish his mission before the other Champions arrived.

After a couple of minutes, Romeo arrived before a new set of monumental doors. Fortunately, those ones weren’t made of Orichalcum...it would have been hard to use the same method as the one used at the entrance without bringing down a mountain upon his head.

Two average battle-spells, and the protections failed.

Romeo Malatesti entered.

Untold riches offered themselves immediately to his gaze.

This hall was undoubtedly the greatest of the Conqueror’s Grave, and yet it was filled with wealth beyond imagination.

And yes, ‘filled’ wasn’t an exaggeration. Save the avenue leading to what had to be the largest throne in existence, and the space needed to place three hundred hoplite statues clad in real armour before it, everything was extremely valuable...or priceless.

Perfectly preserved, the treasures of Ancient Greece and Egypt were there, rivalling in beauty and ingenious creativity. There were highly sophisticated enchanted devices of the ancient Achaemenid Empire, next to four metres-tall statues of Athena and Ares. There were Runic Orbs from Thebes, burning with power, despite having been created over two thousand years ago. Frescoes and statues existed next to Ward Stones. Alchemical-made metals had been shaped into a thousand chests to contain more Alchemical reagents and first-class magical treasures.

There was no illusion, no trickery.

Those were the missing pieces so many archaeologists, Curse-Breakers, and countless audacious souls had spent their lives in the vain hope they would one day have a glimpse of it.

It was the Treasure of Alexander the Great, the loot of a campaign so prodigious it had led him from Macedon to India.

And the hoplite armours, so richly decorated, had to be the military protections of the Companions, Alexander’s most legendary unit.

“Too bad there isn’t enough time...I wish I could study some of the artefacts...” many of them looked like they would be extremely useful on a battlefield. They may not be able to defeat Ra, but they would likely give this bastard a few seconds of pause. “Now...where is the Ark of the Covenant?”

Romeo Malatesti had been given a very detailed description of the Ark, so precise in fact he had been convinced there would be no problem finding it. After all, something shining with enough gold and Light magic to illuminate an entire palace was not complicated to find, right?

Wrong.

There were many, many powerful Light artefacts here, and gold...well, there wasn’t a shortage of it, and that was probably the understatement of the millennium.

“Come on, come on...”

A new explosion shook...everything, and the ground trembled for ten good seconds.

But if more dust appeared, there were no fissures or anything like that.

“I really hope my fellow Dark Champions aren’t going to destroy the Grave...I don’t fancy my chances digging my way out of this tomb.”

But the more he looked, the more Romeo felt certain his eyes hadn’t seen the Ark. There was no possible way to miss the Grail, the Ring, or Excalibur when you saw them, surely the same had to be true about the last of the Ancient Three!

“If I was an arrogant, megalomaniac conqueror, where would I hide my greatest treasure...no, surely even he wouldn’t be that arrogant...”

Romeo Malatesti decided to check nonetheless.

The steps of the throne were climbed in a hurry, and when golden drapes stood in the way, the Champion of Mars conjured swords and shredded them. As they fell, they revealed an alcove behind the throne...and there, at last, Romeo could watch the Ark of the Covenant.

The Dark Champion would be the first to admit that artworks and gold-forged artefacts weren’t really his thing. He left that to Lucrezia Sforza and plenty of artist-students of the Scuola Regina. But the Ark...it had an unreal beauty. It was perfection. It couldn’t be part of this world, and yet it was. It entranced you. It tempted you.

And none of that mattered, for Romeo Malatesti had a mission.

He reinforced his Occlumency shields, and went to work.

The Champions of Ares casted six evocations, before carving six cluster of Runes. Immediately, the Light waned and became more...appeased, more tolerable.

The top of the Ark was removed with some difficulty, as it was extremely heavy for all his Animagus strength and-

Romeo’s eyes fell upon an artefact that shouldn’t have been here.

It seemed to be soaked in darkness, and shaped like a dark crystal.

It had no reason to be here.

“Betrayal,” the Dark Champion breathed out.

“**Betrayal**,” a voice behind him agreed. “**It was a mistake to come here alone, thief. Now receive the reward your actions deserve**.”

Romeo Malatesti instinctively attacked while turning to face his ambusher.

And then he began to scream.

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The moment Alexandra had heard Malatesti screaming was the moment Alexandra’s last doubts had dissipated.

It had been a trap all along.

And the worst part was they couldn’t withdraw and come back with much needed reinforcements.

They needed the Ark of the Covenant, and they needed it now.

There was no choice but to advance.

Unfortunately, the crocodiles and the rest of the opposition didn’t cooperate.

Alexandra had killed hundreds of the Hetkoshu monsters, but there were hundreds more, and as impossible as it seemed, the longer she used a spell, the more the beasts were growing more resistant to it.

Thus she had to use a lot of her arsenal of spells...like all the elemental ones she knew. The Dark spells were kept in reserve for the final fight...if they were enemy eyes upon them, it was best to not reveal too much immediately.

The screams of the Champion of War echoed as they ruined ballistae and sent hundreds of hoplite armours into the lake.

Malatesti was still screaming when the Champion of Death turned the lake blood as a thousand crocodile corpses floated lifelessly, and the flow of Hetkoshu reinforcements severely diminished before dropping to zero.

Next to her, Lyudmila had turned the Potion-filled trenches into a nightmare of poison and corruptive sludge...but one under her control.

The spikes of Orichalcum, once they were revealed or materialised were struck with overwhelming force, then diverted by enormous block of stones, and though there was collateral damage, they didn’t receive anything more than a scratch. The Hieroglyphs were scorched, blasted into nonexistence, or all power had been diverted from them by Innocence’s spells.

It was a rampage of destruction, and at long last, it stopped.

The lake was entirely devoid of life, the tower-platforms where the enemy artillery had been were empty, and everything that might have been a trap or some diabolical means of killing them was spread out in so many pieces that no repairing Charms would ever have a chance to rebuild it.

The so-called ‘Trial of God’ was over, and they had triumphed.

And the screams of Romeo Malatesti were no longer heard.

Silently, the three witches looked at each other...before assembling a bridge of dead crocodiles and crossing the submerged hall.

Evidently, the previous strategy had been an error. How big the error was...well, they were soon going to have the answer, one way or another.

Once past the Egyptian doors, they ran, throwing spells ahead to trigger any possible trap. But none came.

 Soon enough, the descent into the mountain ceased, and this time they began to climb stairs again.

They passed through several shattered gates.

And finally they arrived in the final hall...the treasury room...the heart of the tomb.

There was enough wealth there to buy an empire. It was likely the greatest gathering of magical artefacts and artworks she had ever seen, be it in a single location or anywhere else.

And Alexandra ignored it.

Like Lyudmila and Eleonora, her eyes were entirely focused on the ‘Egopolis Throne’ and the wizard sitting upon it.

It was Romeo Malatesti...and yet it wasn’t.

The sheer sensation of unnaturalness would have been a clue, but it was unneeded.

Romeo Malatesti, like a lot of Venetian students of the Scuola Regina, had a very tanned skin. It was certainly far darker than Alexandra’s, Lyudmila’s, and even Eleonora’s.

This was something that had been true all year, and it still had been true when they entered the Conqueror’s Grave.

But here, the face of the Dark Champion was deathly white...and then there were his eyes.

Romeo Malatesti’s irises had been black, not green. And certainly not the shade of green that could be described as ‘Killing Curse green’.

In addition to that, the Venetian Champion was certainly arrogant, but not to the point to conjure a golden armour for himself.

Behind the throne, the Ark of Covenant levitated...or rather the artefact which had been the Ark of Covenant.

The Potter Heiress didn’t know how it was possible, but this was no longer a Light artefact. Oh, there was an elaborate glamour over it, one which gave you an illusion of gold and splendour, but it was a falsehood.

The artefact behind the illusion was looking like it was made of ebony and obsidian, with onyx gems and some Orichalcum.

In fact...an iridescent rainbow-like erupted out of the Ark, and suddenly there was a dangerous sword in the hands of Malatesti.

A sword of Orichalcum.

The Ravenclaw had a suddenly feeling they had just been given the last missing clue of the mystery they had asked themselves the moment they faced the Orichalcum Gate at the entrance. The Ark was creating the Alchemical metal.

Seriously, how more ridiculousness could be expected from the artefacts Ra created?

“**So the last thieves have arrived in my throne room**...” Alexandra shivered, because she was familiar with that kind of voice. The tonality may be different, but it was imbued with the same madness she had heard when Galahad screamed his intention to become the King of Britannia. This was the voice of a madman. “**Are you at least clever enough to realise the truth**?”

“This was never a Grave in the first place, isn’t it?” Alexandra said slowly. “This was your *prison*. The Orichalcum Gate was closed to make sure you wouldn’t escape. You could create more of it, but you couldn’t alter the one which had been already forged and Alchemically stabilised.”

Two hands with deathly skin that would never have been out of place on a vampire clapped slowly, mockingly.

“**Indeed**.” The Possessed Romeo Malatesti smiled, and it was something that shouted ‘twisted craziness’ if there was any expression for it. “**They thought the ravages of time would end me, but they were wrong. I was no longer mortal...I had taken steps that no one before me had taken. My power grew beyond Gods**!”

The Orichalcum sword struck the marble, and an enormous amount of magic coalesced.

Power began to burn around Malatesti’s body, and it was something...Dark. Incredibly Dark...and twisted.

“**I am Alexander, the Invincible Conqueror. At long last, I am alive. I feel magic returning to its proper place...which mean it is time for me to be crowned again**.”

Lyudmila Romanov laughed.

“Your Empire died more than two thousand years ago, spirit. Try again.”

The grin that was returned was absolutely not reassuring.

“**I assure you, I will. I conquered an Empire before...and I will conquer a new one in this day and age! I am the King of Kings, the Master of Light and Darkness, the future third Avatar! Now...*kneel***!”

The last words exploded like a spell, and maybe it was one in many ways.

It was powerful. It likely would have brought a lot of Tournament Champions and substitutes to their knees.

Against the three Champions present?

It might have well been a moderately powerful breeze.

“No.” Alexandra shook her head. “I don’t think we will.”

With the benefit of hindsight...maybe it had not been a bad idea to send Malatesti ahead. He was likely the least powerful of them...and not exactly renowned for his strategic skills.

But then again...it was likely he was the only one to have a flaw which made Possession a possibility in the first place. Calling Sobek during the Second Task must have damaged his connection to War more than she thought.

Or the Tyrant in front of them had an artefact which allowed him to Possess someone, Champion or not.

This was really one of those days, wasn’t it?

“In fact as the Champion of Death, I really, really hate when someone tells me to kneel.”

**17 February 1995, the Conqueror’s Throne Room**

“In fact as the Champion of Death, I really, really hate when someone tells me to kneel.”

That reaction, Eleonora knew, was totally predictable for anyone having the tiniest bit of information about Alexandra Potter. But apparently, the soul Possessing Malatesti hadn’t cared about that...which may be the greatest mistake Alexander – assuming it was really him – would ever make.

A sword of lightning flashed into existence in the Hogwarts Champion’s hands.

“In fact,” the voice of the young witch became colder and more ruthless, “I think the Morrigan is going to thank me when I send her another follower of Ra into her realm. For a lot of good reasons, Death really hates everyone who chooses to follow the Archmage of Light. Rejoice, oh Conqueror, for you largely qualify.”

“**Mighty words**,” the Possessed on the throne remarked with arrogance, “**for someone who was humiliated by Ra**.”

“Yes, I lost against the Old Light Fossil, as my fellow Champion of Chaos so aptly named him,” Lyudmila Romanov snickered as she drew Gungnir once again. “Guess what? Ra is not here to save you.”

“**Do you really think you can defeat me? You, someone who had yet to accept an Apprenticeship**?”

But the mockery fell flat, as Alexandra Potter watched Malatesti’s body with the eyes of a predator.

“I think...” and the voice was almost melancholic, “that if Ra had really wished it, he could have used his power and forced me to kneel. It would likely have taken a lot of time, even for him, but he could have done it. You, on the other hand, are fundamentally unable to make our legs shake. Moreover, I looked at your official biography when I studied in the Scuola Regina’s library. Assuming you are the one you pretend to me, you died young.”

Sure, thirty-plus years old, give it a few years or not, was still nearly two decades over them...but assuming this soul Possessing Malatesti was really Alexandra’s long-distant ancestor, he was completely out of practise. Not to mention the court wizards and all the allies he could count upon when he was the King of Macedon were long gone.

“I think that in time, before Ra dies, I will be able to proudly say to him I succeeded where he failed. I will tell him I permanently put you down.”

“**Ra must not die**.”

This time Eleonora was utterly surprised and gaped.

Alexandra Potter, however, was far less impressed.

“Fortunately, I don’t care what you think.”

“**Your words betray your ignorance**,” the snarl on Malatesti’s face and the sheer arrogance emanating from him told the Champion of Innocence clearly that no, she wouldn’t have enjoyed living at the court of Alexander the Conqueror while he was alive. Of course, it was possible his soul-imprisonment here had made things worse, but somehow, Eleonora didn’t think so. “**You only know half of the story! Didn’t you wonder why the First Pharaoh did favour Ra so much? Why he was granted the prerogatives to be Heir so easily**?”

The Champion of Death...just shrugged.

“You describe it like if it is straight in the realm of impossible. Many parents favour one child above the others...and the older they get, the more some parents are set in their ways. The First Pharaoh was too blind to see the flaws of his son. It’s tragic, but there’s nothing supernatural about that.”

“**No**,” worryingly, the right cheek of Malatesti had a sudden cut, which began to bleed slowly, despite none of the Champions present have yet attacked. “**My loyal Companions found out the truth in one of the libraries that had survived the destruction of the great kingdom. Unlike all the other children, Ra and Osiris were not born after the defeat of the Great Enemy. They were born a few days before the final battle**!”

“Should we,” Alexandra Potter yawned and then answered in a tone that nearly collapsed the throne room under the power of sarcasm, “feel completely overwhelmed by that revelation?”

“**You don’t understand, it seems**,” Alexander the Conqueror – for the sheer level of arrogance shown made it difficultly reasonable to think it was someone else, in Eleonora’s opinion – hissed. “**The First Pharaoh and his armies could destroy the physical shell of the Great Enemy, but all the power of the greatest realm to have ever existed couldn’t destroy the soul, and this soul would in time recover. Thus decision was made to imprison the Great Enemy’s soul into a newborn**.”

What?

“**At the same time, an Eternal Seal of control was placed onto the newborn’s twin, ensuring the memories and all experiences from the Great Enemy were forever denied to it as long as the boy lived. And as long as this influence was kept in check, the Great Enemy was unable to devour the newborn’s soul**.”

Eleonora had been no stranger to fear during these last days. But the Champion of Vesta was honest enough to admit that this explanation froze her in horror. Ra and Osiris had spent so many millennia killing each other, and...oh, by the Powers...

Clearly, there was no way to verify if this was the truth. But it made a disturbing amount of sense. Each Pharaoh, before the civil war which destroyed everything, was extremely long-lived. If someone was to live longer, better it be the ‘anchor’ who kept the Great Enemy at bay by his very existence.

And it also explained Osiris’ survival for millennia. Many, Henri and Eleonora among them, had wondered why Death had made an exception for him, Dark Avatar or not. Now with this explanation, it may be the answer was...that Death didn’t. If the soul of the Great Enemy gave Osiris immortality...

“And Ra knows.”

Alexandra Potter didn’t make it a question, and to be fair, Eleonora knew there wasn’t much glory to have arrived to this conclusion.

“Does Osiris know?”

“**No. And he won’t**.”

The ‘because I am going to kill you here’ wasn’t uttered. But the fantastic arrogance left little doubt about it, and the three Champions heard it nonetheless.

“You know,” they turned towards Alexandra, whose expression had turned...into a grimace of disgust. “The more you speak, the more I feel the urge to vomit. You clearly didn’t turn against Ra because you felt the Archmage was mistaken or had turned against your ideals. You didn’t argue because there were thousands of massacres. You just turned because you saw an opportunity to topple the two Avatars and turn them into your servants.”

“**And**?” the arrogance once again...there was enough there to fill the entire Mediterranean Sea with it. “**I would have resurrected the Old Kingdom! No, I would have made it better! Under my guidance, the scars of the previous wars would have been erased! From my capital of Alexandropolis, the Throne of the Kingdom of Kingdoms would have ruled over billions! Where Ra and Osiris destroyed, I would have rebuilt everything and turned into an Elysian Kingdom for my Heroes**!”

Eleonora had to interrupt that ugly rant.

“Say that to the inhabitants of Tyr, *butcher*, *traitor to Innocence*.”

“**Some sacrifices have to be tolerated**,” the face of the Champion Alexander Possessed snarled, “**for this is the revival of unity under a single ruler which is at stake! It is for**-“

“Yeah, *it is for the Greater Good*.” This time, there was emotion behind Alexandra Potter’s voice...and this was fury. “Do you know what I think? In my opinion, keeping you imprisoned here was the best idea the architects of these challenges had for the entirety of their lives.”

“**You are one of my descendants, a Chosen of the Prophecy of Ragnarok! You will fight to usher my divine ascension**!”

“I am one of your descendants,” the Champion of Death smiled, “and guess what? I feel you have stayed for far too long on this earth. Changelina, my Cloak!”

There was a shimmer, and it was like a silk veil began to move around her...

And Alexandra Potter disappeared, absolutely invisible.

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There was a saying you learned more when you were defeated than when you were victorious.

Alexandra was not going to argue against it.

Ra had defeated her, but it had made her realise something that she had not remembered enough when the Fourth Task began.

Cheating, be it in magical duels or other dangerous situations, was absolutely necessary.

All her opponents had in general years to master specialties that she had no idea about. When it came to Ra, the advantages were measured in millennia. Reality-breaking artefacts had been forged to kill Champions like her centuries before her mother was even born.

When the battlefield was so stacked against you, fighting fair was for the imbeciles.

That was why she had come in the Conqueror’s Grave with her Cloak of Invisibility, and the Potter Heiress had not used it, or even hinted she had it in her possession until now.

Something that had proved a good idea, as their enemy had clearly been able to access Malatesti’s memories.

Obviously, being invisible was not a duel-winning advantage.

But the Conqueror had another opponent to deal with.

“***AVERNUS CHAOTICA***!”

The incantation itself made the entire throne room shriek and tremble.

The attack which came after the spell proved why.

Two giants wolves made of utter darkness were conjured, and as they howled, magic of dark crimson shade was hurled like enormous maws.

It was a battle-spell that could have killed a few Champions instantly, if they were in a conventional Task.

But the other duellist was made of sterner stuff, and for all his arrogance, the soul Possessing Malatesti had not survived with empty boasts.

Laser-like attacks of purple-white immediately answered, and over a dozen shields were created. Yet when Lyudmila’s attack hit, over two-thirds of the magical defences broke outright...and the Dark Queen attacked again, the howls of wolves creating an atmosphere of pure chaos.

Alexandra charged up the stairs, banished dozens of animated hoplites several metres away, and uttered the evocation of the Sowilo Rune. Immediately, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant was violently thrown away, revealing the abomination within.

It looked like a dark crystal, but it was not.

Souls and lives had been sacrificed to fuel that artefact, and no matter how much effort had been put into it, it remained extremely fragile. The sheer power its owner wanted to contain had kept it from gaining the stability a Horcrux or Phylactery would have had no problem to achieve.

The Basilisk Slayer didn’t hesitate.

“FULGUREM MORTIS!”

Two blades using both elemental lightning and the power of Death itself materialised, the green magic extension of her will and the Morrigan.

And then Alexandra plunged them into the depths of the Ark of the Covenant.

“**NOOOOOOOOOOOOO**!”

It was like they had thrown an enormous bomb in the throne room.

Alexandra closed her eyes and felt herself flying away.

The landing was...well, not gracious or anything approaching it.

For a long time, it seemed as the world had gone insane...and visions danced before her eyes. Visions of Venice, the sea city, and its prison of time faltering as the powers unleashed destroyed in mere hours all the rituals of the Exchequer.

It ended, as all things should.

And when everything stopped spinning and swaying, Alexandra realised she was lying a metre away from Malatesti...who had begun to recover some skin colour. They were far from his usual tanned looks, but he didn’t look cadaveric any longer.

He remained absolutely ridiculous in this outrageous golden armour, though.

“I don’t want to give lessons to anyone, but yeah...that was a stupid idea, War.”

The Champion of the Scuola Regina tried to chuckle...before groaning pitifully in pain.

“Please...don’t...make me laugh...my ribs...everything hurts...”

Alexandra breathed out in relief, and moved to let Eleonora cast a few Healing spells.

Only then did the Potter Heiress gave a glance to the Ark...and the artefact had changed again. This time, the onyx and obsidian were disappearing, and emeralds were summoned out of the void, along with green marble and many gemstones shining in ethereal emerald-like lights.

“By the trickeries of Loki...you turned the Ark of Covenant into the *Ark of Death*?” the Dark Queen snickered before exploding into full laughter.

“I doubt she did it on purpose...you didn’t do it on purpose, Alexandra?” Eleonora asked, visibly worried.

“I didn’t do it on purpose.” The Ravenclaw confirmed, and her voice betrayed her exhaustion. “I wanted to kill Ra’s Apprentice, and well...that happened.”

If anything, that made sure that a certain Russian Champion howled louder a second later.

“Malatesti...what he said...about Ra and Osiris...”

“He wasn’t lying.” The Champion of Ares answered, his body writhing in pain as the Possession must have inflicted a terrible amount of damage to his body. “For many minutes, our minds were intertwined...I saw the city under the sea where he found his knowledge. And when he challenged Ra for the last time...I saw the Archmage confirm his words. He...he wasn’t lying.”

The chaos had ended, and as a consequence...the words were welcomed by a silence of death, and it wasn’t a bad pun.

“We must return to Venice immediately.” Eleonora was the first to recover.

“And,” Alexandra said as she summoned her Invisibility Cloak from where it had fallen, “hope we are not too late.”

**Author’s note**:

The Odds were never in my favour will continue in chapter 109, whose tentative title is: *See Venice and Die*. It is time for the masks to fall...

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