**Chapter 120**

**Knight Necromancer**

**8 April 1995, first level of the Mushroom Arena, the Coliseum**

"*I will be the new Champion of Fate*!"

You could clearly say a lot of things about the traitorous Knight Necromancer, but you couldn't accuse her of lacking ambition.

At least, that was Alexandra's first thought.

Her second was that it was unfortunately not devoid of a certain form of logic.

Yes, in past days, the Lady Protector had wondered if the Exchequer deserter had been trying to usurp her, in order to become a new Champion of Death.

But with the benefit of hindsight, why would the Necromancer take such a risk?

There was nothing to win and everything to lose.

There was a Champion of Death: Alexandra. And unlike Romeo Malatesti, who had damaged his 'relationship' with Ares by calling forth Sobek during the Second Task, there was no evident flaw to exploit against her.

Why do something so complicated when the risks were high and the chances to fail were maximal?

It would be best described as an act of stupidity and desperation, and the Knights of the Exchequer could rarely be accused of behaving like idiots.

No, from a rational perspective, it was far better to stake a claim on a Champion title which had no current holder.

It wasn't like there was a shortage of them, after Venice.

All of them were critical, no matter how you looked at it.

But there were none as valuable and potentially powerful as Fate.

For a few seconds, Alexandra almost regretted having removed Neville Longbottom from his Champion's duties.

Almost.

"*When the time comes*-"

"SILENCIO MAXIMA OGHAM!"

The speech of the Necromancer abruptly ended, and Alexandra had no doubt that under her black cloak, the traitorous witch was sending her a death glare.

The Champion of the Morrigan didn't care.

It was bad enough the foe had somehow managed to circumvent the Coliseum's protections to appear in front of a massive audience, but a limit had to be drawn somewhere.

It was possible it was only delaying the inevitable, but the Ravenclaw teenager was not going to let her begin a long recruitment speech, or something equally bad.

"*DEXIR*!"

Her Silencing Charm shattered in a single counter-curse.

Yeah, she should have expected that.

You could say a lot of things about the Exchequer these days, but you didn't get rewarded with a title of Knight by nepotism or finding the chess piece in a package of sweets.

"*You have much to learn, little Champion of the End*." The voice was mocking, and this reawakened her fury, which didn't need a lot after the frustration vented against Delacour and Malatesti. "*As I was saying*-"

"FACIA BULLA AERIA!"

Alexandra had honestly not expected to cast this variant of the Bubble-Head Charm, for it had no practical use forever save as some minor pranks.

Yeah, it had been funny when Fred and George used it against others, but in the end, it just made your voice sound utterly unintelligible for the entirety of the audience, since it suddenly sounded like you were trying and failing to speak a fish language.

Her opponent spoke for five or six seconds, before realising something was wrong. It might have to do with hundreds of spectators laughing, or the pink-coloured bubble surrounding her astral projection's head.

"*LAN*!"

This was easily an OWLs-level Charm in complexity. And the counter to cancel it was easily as complicated as the first incantation.

The Knight Necromancer overwhelmed it by sheer power in a single second.

And Alexandra winced, because it was a good reminder that she had fought for long minutes in the arena, but the unanticipated intruder was fresh and well-rested.

If it came to attrition, there was going to be one winner left standing, and it would not be the Champion of Death.

"*Are you going to stop this ridiculous game*?" the humour was gone, and boredom had replaced it.

"Why, since you are unwanted here?" Alexandra gritted her teeth. "I call for the Ley Lines of Venice, and the elements of the storm! Thurisaz, Wunjo, Dagaz, Idhadh, Getal and Pin, all bow before Perthro, hear my prayer. I have defeated my opponents here, and I banish the unwanted!"

"That isn't going to work," the Necromancer said unimpressed. "You are miss-"

Her true name? Yeah, she absolutely had to know that.

"Begone, **Arianna Dumbledore**."

There was a horrible shrieking sound, and the darkness was blown away.

The dark abyss closed, the astral projection broke, and everything exploded.

Alexandra stumbled forwards, and it took significant physical compensation to not crash into the mushroom-covered floor.

Ouch.

That had cost her a lot. It was long overdue that Sixth Task ended.

Unfortunately, as the train in the distance reminded her with its very presence, it was not yet over.

"The Necromancer's proclamation is done, now let's punish the troublemakers..."

**8 April 1995, Hogwarts, Scotland**

For long seconds, Albus Dumbledore didn't breathe.

It was as if everything that had given his heart the strength to beat had vanished.

It was as if the same pits of despair that had threatened to swallow him several times in his life were screaming their joy and paralysing him in the process.

A tiny part of him wanted to believe the Black Witch had uttered a lie, just to injure him mind, body, and soul.

James Potter's spawn had never been hesitant about dragging his reputation through an ocean of mud, so why not do it again when the opportunity presented itself?

But the rest of his head knew better.

What had just been shown in front of the entire world was a spell of astral banishment.

An unconventional one to be sure, and Albus honestly didn't know where the Black Witch had picked up the idea, because it certainly wasn't in Hogwarts or the Scuola Regina's library.

But one thing was sure: this spell wouldn't have worked if the birth name of the person hadn't been adequately added to the spell.

In other words, if it hadn't truly been his sister down there, the banishment incantation would have done exactly nothing.

Albus breathed out again.

And again.

He felt...exhausted.

Exhausted and disappointed.

With himself. With Grindelwald. With everyone.

Yes, the Headmaster of Hogwarts had thought of the worst scenarios when the grave had been revealed to contain nothing but a Homunculus.

But they had been just that, scenarios.

His sister had been gentle, kind, and unable to hurt someone on purpose. Maybe she had been allowed to live her days in a luxury hospital off the Adriatic Coast? Maybe there had been wizards to take her away and show her the splendours of Asia and the Americas before her magical core aged her prematurely before her death?

Albus had tried to search, of course, after that dark night of Halloween, but when the traces were more than a century old, the tracking effort was doomed to failure.

Between two World Wars on the Muggle side and some particularly vicious conflicts on the magical one, any clues, assuming there had been any in the first place, were long gone.

"Aberforth is going to try to kill me."

His brother may not watch the Sixth Task of the Tournament at this hour, but that was little comfort. There was an enchanted mirror in Hogsmeade to allow the inhabitants to watch the performance of the Champions live, and people talked.

Someone would unavoidably open his mouth at the Hog's Head Pub before dusk, and then...

Then, as the Muggles say, hell hath no fury like a brother scorned.

Suddenly, the Headmaster of Hogwarts felt really, really old.

And there was this urge to take Fawkes and go drown himself in a barrel of Firewhiskey before his problems caught up with him. Really, your torments couldn't pursue you with nightmares if you were too drunk to have them, no?

"But why do I think it will solve anything?"

Yes, he could get insanely drunk.

The insane mess that had just been dropped into his lap was not going to disappear.

There were going to be political repercussions.

And as much as he wanted to believe they were going to be insignificant compared to the *familial* ones, Albus was not blind.

Black Witch. Black Files.

James Potter's spawn knew enough to say Grindelwald and himself were lovers in the past; from there it wasn't a great stretch to acknowledge the possibility that she knew about this horrible three-way duel that had taken place over a century ago.

The wizards and witches were going to want answers, and the cabal of Dark Lords and Ladies playing the game behind the scenes would have no reluctance to throw him to the wolves.

Albus wanted to say it was the worst part of this awful moment of revelation.

But it wasn't.

That particular 'reward' should go to the fact his sister had broken her chains, because clearly neither Sforza nor her accomplices had any reason to organise something like this interruption in the middle of a Tournament Task.

Thus his sister truly could have escaped and spoken to him at any moment...and if not him, to Aberforth. The eldest son of the Dumbledore family was not blind to the fact that his younger sibling had always been the favourite of Arianna.

Had she tried to contact Aberforth before today? No, she likely hadn't. Otherwise the sonorous confrontation Albus had expected since last year would have come far earlier. Aberforth would have already stormed the gates of Hogwarts, with his bare hands if he needed to.

This was not good.

No, this was really bad.

This depressing situation always led back to the dreadful question he had never uttered aloud, whether he was alone or in presence of other parties.

"At least it is over for now. I suppose there are going to be owls from the Ministry, but then I am already officially a fugitive, they can't do much-"

The Defeater of Grindelwald stopped, for in the arena, the Black Witch had stopped walking too.

The darkness was back, less intense, but clearly bearing the same origin as before.

"*Impressive*." The distorted voice of his sister echoed for millions of ears to hear. "*At your age, I suppose I would never have been able to alter the first two steps of the Seal of Ptolemy and convert them into some form of Futhark-Ogham combination to banish an astral projection*."

There was a flash of lightning which burst out of Potter's wand...and it did absolutely nothing.

"*But if you really want the banishment to last for a few hours, you need something like the Seal of Nefertiti. Otherwise, it's really easy to try again and establish a new connection*."

**8 April 1995, somewhere in the mountains north of the Coliseum, lands of the Magical Republic of Venice**

Mulan, better known as Knight Summoner by those aware of the Exchequer's existence, was not in a pleasant mood.

"You're telling me we can't locate where this treacherous Necromancer is hiding, in addition to admitting your failure to disrupt her astral ritual?"

The long-living female Knight didn't add 'what am I paying you for?' but her expression must have spoken for itself, for her subordinates hurried to answer.

"We have cast a complex series of incantations, Knight Summoner, and we can assure you that the traitor is not anywhere close, and by that, we mean a minimum of three hundred kilometres. Unfortunately, it seems her mentors were as excellent as their reputation suggested, and despite her young age, Knight Necromancer indeed developed a way to send herself in astral form far away from her body, while at the same time preventing magical beings from finding her base."

"No ritual or magic is without its counter," the red-robed mage angrily retorted. "She was able to bypass the protections we have because she worked here last year, as did the majority of the Knights under the King's guidance. There must be a weakness to be found."

"There is, Knight Summoner, but at the moment, we are in complete agreement that the likeliest course of action taken by the traitor is a necromantic artefact that is acting both as a beacon and an anchor for her astral projection. Unfortunately, we haven't studied under Knight Necromancer, so we have no idea what it could be-"

"And the ones who know are all dead or being interrogated as we speak," a familiar voice affirmed.

Mulan didn't even turn her head.

"Knight Priest."

"Knight Summoner." Her peer saluted her. "Stop looking like a woman who wants to bite the heads off your subordinates, it won't give you the answers you need."

"Forgive me if I am not happy we have a traitor here who can reveal some quite significant secrets to the world at large!"

"Secrets can cut both ways," the wizard replied, his face remaining imperturbable. "And unlike us, she revealed herself as a Necromancer, one whose first open act was to disrupt a rather peaceful interschool competition today. It is not going to do her any favours."

The white-robed mage turned towards the assembled Pawns and Rooks who had mustered here.

"Your conclusion about the necromantic artefact?"

"It is likely hidden somewhere in the Coliseum, Knight Priest, but the two most likely scenarios are incredibly problematic. The first one is that it was thrown into the conjured stones of the foundations at the creation of the Coliseum. That way it would stay latent and undetectable until the Necromancer needed it. Obviously, it is detectable now, and our personnel are on the move, but since we really have to be on top of it to find out which stone could contain the heirloom, I must admit it is going to take time. Moreover-"

"Moreover we would have to destroy the stone hiding the artefact, and it could lead to unpleasant consequences since the stadium is filled to the brink with foreign spectators, yes."

Knight Summoner would have taken the risk anyway, but she knew enough about Knight Priest and some other peers to acknowledge they wouldn't go ahead with it until the end of the Task.

"And the second method she could have used?"

"Smuggling an artefact via a spectator and placing it somewhere it won't be noticed, like in the middle of an ecstatic group of near-adult students is another possibility." The sentence was uttered near-unflinchingly. "We have to apologise, my Lord Knights, but the security teams at the entrance only had the orders to confiscate everything that could be of a lethal nature, minus the magical foci. Since an artefact supporting an astral projection is not going to kill anyone, it would not have been difficult for someone to spirit it pass the Coliseum's handlers. A good percentage of them don't belong to the Exchequer; they can't recognise the magical signature of Knight Necromancer even if their life depended upon it."

There was a loud buzzing sound. The wave of bad news was far from over.

"She's back. The Queen's Apprentice forced her to adapt her astral projection, but it seems this wasn't enough to prevent a second attempt."

"We could intervene," she proposed.

"It wouldn't be my preferred course of action." Knight Priest didn't rise his voice, but the warning was here.

"Ra and his band of sycophants are no longer here to stop us."

"But we don't know why Arianna Dumbledore came here today," the white-robed mage replied, shaking slowly his head. "Yes, we knew she was ambitious. But let's face it: to become a Champion of Magic, there is no rule that demands someone make a big announcement in front of a very large amount of magical and non-magical beings. This applies as much to the Champions of Fate as it does to those of the other Powers."

"Correct," she conceded.

It was true that no one was really beyond gloating and insulting one's enemies after a great victory was won, but that wasn't the case here: the traitorous Knight Necromancer couldn't have become the Champion of Fate without them being aware of the change.

Dark or Light – and these last millennia, it had been the Light every time – they felt it in the air, the water, and the Dark.

Yes, they often arrived too late to do anything but assess the damage and prepare for the elimination of said Champion, but even Ra at the height of his hubris had not dared announce in advance who would serve as his favourite lackey for a few years.

Telling everyone a weapon was being forged was a good way to lose it before the process was complete, this was just common sense.

Yet it was exactly what was happening here.

Which naturally raised the important question.

"What in the name of all the armies of Qin is she doing here?"

**8 April 1995, first level of the Mushroom Arena, the Coliseum**

The real problem, and it was one Alexandra would think a lot about in the next days, was that there existed plenty of ways to do an astral projection.

Technically, after all, the Patronus and the Ecclesial were among the list of spells that could create one: you just sent your inner animal turned into magic to someone as a messenger...or against an enemy you wanted to repel.

The problem remained.

She couldn't banish the Necromancer for good – or even until this Task was over.

Judging by the absence of intervention from outside parties, it was likely that the Exchequer couldn't find a solution to do any good either.

"Speak your piece, then, Arianna Dumbledore."

"*That name means nothing to me anymore*," the traitorous Knight answered with no emotion whatsoever in her voice.

Either she was a superb liar, or she spoke the truth.

The Champion of the Morrigan didn't know which option was the most worrying.

"Speak your piece," the Lady Protector repeated, "and begone."

"*Gladly*," the Necromancer acquiesced. "*The era of the Light is no more. The Age of the two Avatars is over. This world is in need of a new Queen to defend against the threats we forgot by the fault of the Statute of Secrecy and those who might yet come from beyond. I am that Queen*."

In some aspects, as much she found it galling, Alexandra acknowledged it was not so different than the speeches she had given to convince some people that the Isles needed a new Lady Protector.

This left a few thousand questions, and one above all.

"The organisation you once swore your allegiance to has a Queen."

"*Not one who can become the Champion of Fate*."

The young Champion of Death didn't like at all where this conversation was going.

"It is the Power who names the Champion, not the reverse. You can try to tilt the balance so it weighs in your favour, but it has no guarantee of working."

Any attempt, needless to say, was extremely dangerous. Morgane had told her that at least four wizards in her first non-vampiric life had tried to contest the choice of Death. Each time the Power had taken offence and retaliated, killing thousands.

"*We are unbound by the rules of the Light Age. Ra is gone; Fate can now fulfil the purpose of the Dark*."

"What Ra did was an abomination not just for the Light, but for Magic in general," Alexandra retorted. "Have you learned nothing from this debacle, Necromancer?"

"*Have you learned nothing from your defeats*?" The Necromancer spoke as if she had been the one to bring an end to the Archmage, despite being nowhere in sight during the decisive battle. "*You are weak and unable to stand against anyone who has more raw power than you do. You don't stand a chance to stop the storm announcing the coming of Ragnarok*."

It was important to keep her calm. The Necromancer was trying to infuriate her.

Better to make sure it didn't work.

"And who will stop it? You? Where were you when your foolish brother imposed discriminatory pro-Light laws across the Isles? Where were you when the Champions fought for their lives and the future during the Venetian Carnival? Where were you when the former Champion of Fate fell and the Grail of Ages was destroyed forever?"

"*I was advancing my plans*," Arianna Dumbledore spoke, but Alexandra this time saw through the lie.

"You were hiding," the Ravenclaw girl corrected, "because as long as Osiris or Ra were around, you knew very well that they would kill you the moment you put a toe out of the line."

"*And yet they are gone*," somehow, the thought that the sister was as self-righteous as the brother arrived at the forefront of her mind. "*They can't provide the shield you want to hide behind*."

Alexandra didn't waste her saliva or energy opening her mouth this time. If this bitch truly thought she had hidden behind some of the Exchequer to save her own skin for most of her life, then there was no use correcting the misunderstanding. The Necromancer would soon understand the depth of her mistake when her sword ended her time on this world.

"*On the day of the Summer Solstice, I will become both Archmage and begin the rites that will make me the Champion of Fate*!" the last daughter of House Dumbledore proclaimed for the whole world to hear. "*I will summon the twelve other Champions to me. They will kneel and acknowledge me as their Queen, or I will choose new ones before making them kneel all the same*!"

Was this what it was like when this mess had begun so long ago?

Did the wizards of the Ancient Kingdom feel the same consternation as Ra shouted his willingness to tear apart everything that had allowed them to survive the previous world-shaking war?

In a way, it didn't matter.

There was only one answer that could be given to someone that crazy.

"If you are so demented as to attempt **it**, I will kill you. This I swear, as the Champion of Death."

A sinister laughter echoed, and once again the darkness withdrew.

"*You can't kill what is already dead, foolish girl*. *You and the other Champions will kneel, or you will be crushed for having the temerity to oppose my rule*!"

There was a chorus of shrieks akin to the howls of a choir of the damned.

And Arianna Dumbledore, the Knight Necromancer, traitor to the Exchequer and every doctrine Osiris had ever wanted for his organisation, vanished.

This time, there was something in the air and the earth that felt like it was a permanent exit.

"We will see about that."

It was a good thing Alexandra liked challenges, no?

**8 April 1995, the Head of Schools' Lodge, the Coliseum**

For several seconds, there was only silence in the Lodge, and it was something shared by the entire Coliseum.

It didn't last, of course.

Soon enough, there were fierce conversations beginning in the stands, wondering whether this had been a genuine Dark Lady announcing cataclysmic attacks for some megalomaniac plan, or simply the attempt of someone trying to perturb the European Magical Tournament.

Unfortunately, Filius Flitwick's coins were on the former, not on the latter. You didn't challenge so many Champions and powerful wizards in a few sentences just for a publicity stunt. The consequences were just too high.

The end of the Statute had promised many good things. But the last minutes also hinted that the idea of merging two worlds that had remained entirely separate for a few centuries was also going to excite the ambitions of whatever equivalent of Dark Lords and Dark Ladies you found on both sides.

Hysterical laughter next to him ended this train of thought.

After a couple of seconds of puzzlement, Filius was surprised to realised it was Karkaroff laughing.

"HA! HA! HA! That hypocrite! That lesson-giver! HA! HA! HA!"

"Were you, per chance," Headmistress Maxime asked politely, "referring to the former Headmaster of Hogwarts?"

"Who else exactly could I speak of?" Karkaroff swallowed the bait without flinching. "It was already hilarious to learn that he had jumped in bed with a Dark Lord *literally* before he accused me and many others of serving a local Dark Lord *politically*. But now I learn that his sister is a Dark Lady-in-being! And a Necromancer at that! HA! Who do you think you were to give us a lesson, you bloody hypocrite? Gutless coward! Light fool! Moralising liar!"

It seemed that the High Master of Durmstrang was revealing all his mastery of the English tongue just for the pleasure of insulting Filius' predecessor.

For yes, unlike most of the conversations so far, Igor Karkaroff had chosen to speak English after his outburst of laughter.

"While I wouldn't presume to deny that my esteemed predecessor had plenty of skeletons buried in his closet, I am not sure he can be blamed for this one." The Charms Professor cleared his throat. "I mean, as far as I knew of his family situation, the relationship between Albus Dumbledore and his brother was icily cold. And the sister was declared formally dead long ago."

"It would fit with the arrogant proclamation that she can't be killed anymore," the French Headmistress nodded.

"Or that she has become an extremely long-lived witch that has delusions of immortality," Karkaroff scoffed. "In the end, who cares? Dumbledore lied...again. He lied again and again, the faithless hypocrite!"

Evidently, uttering these words aloud appeared to bring enormous joy to the man.

Filius personally wouldn't have been so prompt to rejoice, in his humble opinion. Whether or not Dumbledore had been hiding plenty of atrocities behind his facade of respectability, Karkaroff had largely been an unrepentant Death Eater who had killed several wizards and witches before being arrested and sentenced to Azkaban.

And there had never been an 'I was Imperiused' excuse. Karkaroff had been completely unapologetic about the fact. The only reason he had not been serving a life sentence –until Alexandra Potter destroyed Azkaban, of course – was that he had betrayed enough of his fellow Death Eaters to convince the Ministry to expel him to Russia, where his criminal record had been quickly ignored.

"Whether he lied again or not, I suppose future investigations will have to determine the truth of the matter."

"Oh, really! Your student knew who the Necromancer was without any revelation necessary! If she knows, how can her brother ignore it?"

This was a good question, and the likely answer was certainly 'the Black Files'. That or Alexandra Potter had gained new resources to obtain information from in the last months. One obviously didn't exclude the other.

"I refuse to speculate on the matter for the time being." Filius Flitwick said seriously. "Not without knowing more about this very problematic issue."

"Arianna Dumbledore is a Necromancer! How are you going to explain this to the ICW?"

Note to future Duellist Masters: it was a very bad idea to gloat like Karkaroff was doing when you had no idea what you were talking about.

"Being a Necromancer is not a crime by the new laws that have been promulgated by our Lady Protector." And yes, Filius had a good idea why the law had been changed. "Interrupting peaceful international events and delivering threats with murderous intent where you reveal you intend to topple all existing institutions is!"

"The International Confederation of Wizards," Olympe Maxime stated cautiously, "is not going to like that at all."

"Are we going to pretend the ICW's authority is not teetering on the edge of collapse these days?" Filius replied courteously.

"Arianna and Albus Dumbledore must be hunted mercilessly! They must be punished!" Igor Karkaroff didn't drool, but it was a very near thing.

"They will. But not because of any ridiculous titles they chose to hide behind, but because of the serious and very real crimes they committed."

Incidentally, it had not escaped the former Duelling Champion that the sole Head of School that certainly knew everything of the 'Dumbledore Affair' had remained completely silent on the topic.

Angelica Sforza was not watching them at all, and her lips were tight, fixed in a neutral position that was properly inhuman by its lack of emotions.

Before, the Succubus looked royal and could be described as seduction incarnate. Now? She was perfection, but the perfection of an immobile predator. The only part of her head which moved were the eyes, and there was nothing comforting about them.

It didn't take much imagination to wonder if Angelica Sforza was daydreaming about how many recipes one could use to cook a dangerous Necromancer once captured. Given the Venetian cooking, this would likely involve a lot of herbs and spices...

"It looks like Necromancer or not, your Champion has decided she won't allow the others to win this Task," the Headmistress of Beauxbatons said as for the first time in fifteen minutes, a magical train whistled and a Champion jumped on the roof before the tremendous acceleration could begin.

"Yes." The acting-Headmaster of Hogwarts conceded. "I'm interested to see if she has been able to imagine a whole new approach since vanquishing Fleur Delacour."

**8 April 1995, second level of the Mushroom Arena, Coliseum**

"I thought I told you to not underestimate Innocence in our previous reunions, Cedric..."

Seriously, after everything that had happened during the previous Tasks, one might think other Champions would stop underestimating Eleonora da Riva so much.

Or maybe the favourite student of Pomona Sprout had believed their alliance would sustain itself in the name of fair-play?

It was possible, one was speaking of the Hufflepuff Champion, after all. Team-spirit, loyalty to the House, and fair-play were often repeated as a battle-cry.

Alexandra sighed, then shattered the ice prison with a weak Bombarda.

Of course, since Cedric Diggory had been placed into it for several minutes, he was completely knocked out, and a few Charms to return him to consciousness gave nothing.

"There may be a specific counter-curse required."

The problem was: Alexandra didn't know it.

"Ah, too bad. It would have been good to have a second wand to deal with Ambre and Eleonora."

How much could she have trusted Cedric Diggory, in the end, was a topic that would have to remain unanswered for a few more days...

"Well, this isn't my day."

It was a new level of the arena, and she was alone.

Worse, there was a forest of mushrooms waiting for her.

And as the smells and the sights hinted, the mushrooms were far more dangerous than the ones of the first level.

Second level of bad news: Eleonora and her accomplice had succeeded in solving the 'switch puzzle' and got to the third level while she was losing time with the Necromancer.

Alexandra was out of time.

She was out of time, and there was something in the air which was sapping her strength.

The Hydra Animagus hissed.

While it wasn't something she was going to say out loud with tens of thousands of spectators to listen to her every word, the temptation was high to throw in the towel and forfeit here.

The Champion of Ravenclaw had won some points by reaching the second level.

But she didn't know how many, because the Judges had told them nothing, sadistic bastards.

Therefore it was more prudent to keep going and make sure all the points that could be grabbed were taken in the first place. A half-victory in the Sixth Task could ensure a total victory before the Seventh began.

It was not a small thing.

"But I don't think I can win just with a single Fulmen Imperator..."

The Mushrooms were big, like *really, really big*.

Easily bigger than a two-story house.

And many of them were imbued with some type of elemental magic.

No, frontal attacks were not going to work.

In the unlikely scenario where she won, Alexandra would be running on fumes to duel Eleonora anyway, and the older girl was the Champion of Innocence, with someone as a backup.

And Cedric had just showed how much of a bad idea it was to screw up.

"No...I don't think Offensive Magic is going to cut it here. Transfiguration, no, I don't have enough juice to alter the landscape on such a large scale. Charms? Same problem as with Elemental Magic. I can't give enough power to my Rune to stop the growth of the mushrooms, let's not pretend otherwise. Herbology, no, I don't want the mushrooms to get bigger or to spit more acid in my face, thank you very much. Potions-"

Potions. Yes, it could work. Watching Fred and George during her free time had often given her nasty ideas, and it was not like there was a problem of collateral damage here.

The mushrooms had to be removed, one way or another, and the railroad switches looked solid.

"Potions, then. But I have no cauldron...I am going to have to transfigure some giant mushroom volva into one, then."

Was it risky? Yes. If she screwed up the Transfiguration and the stabilising Runes, the 'ingredients' inside would interact with the spores and the spongy substances, and then it would blow up in her face.

"The things I do to bring a nice present to my girlfriend," the Champion of Death breathed out. "Okay, Alexandra Potter versus the giant mushrooms, second round. I need a Weasley Firework Potion, and you, dangerous mushrooms have just volunteered for it. Please don't resist."

**8 April 1995, third level of the Mushroom Arena, the Coliseum**

The third level was far smaller than the second.

As a consequence, they couldn't really miss the sight and the sound of a thousand fireworks exploding at the same time.

Then there was a loud sluicing sound.

After that, it got worse.

The smell got horrifically bad, and flames followed.

Explosions rocked the arena.

Clouds of smoke formed, and they were granted the dubious honour of having their noses assaulted by something reeking of sulphur and rotten eggs.

"Maledicta Fungi," Eleonora da Riva sighed. "Or some British variant of it that was modified for today."

"There exists a spell to get rid of all the mushrooms, and we haven't been using it?" Ambre de Courtois sounded furious, and it was...understandable.

"It's not a spell, it's a Potion."

"Ah."

"And I thought it was impossible to brew it in a day."

"Oh." The French girl scowled. "Is this the moment I ask how in the name of the Gévaudan Beast our fellow Champion did manage this exploit?"

"You can certainly ask the question, I have no answer to offer."

"Of course..."

"That said, after the Third Task, do we have any right to be surprised by her resourcefulness?"

"No." Ambre conceded. "I suppose we don't."

The whistling of the train arrived in their ears.

There were more explosions.

The ground shook, as more fireworks rose in the skies to provide a spectacle few spectators would ever forget.

"What a monster."

Eleonora rolled her eyes.

"Now that we know for sure, the plan should have called to focus on Potter first, and the Dark Queen second. And I shouldn't have trusted the assurances of the other Champions of Hogwarts."

The two boys and the girl stayed bought once properly motivated, but in terms of skill, there was no denying they were not exactly the sharpest tools at her disposal.

"Illusions are useless against her. Elemental Magic is a waste of time, and challenging her in the field of Runes is just begging for a humiliation in front of half of Europe." The sum-up was voiced with dark humour. "Any bright ideas?"

"We exploit her weaknesses, and pray that Delacour was able to exhaust her."

"She has weaknesses?"

"Everyone has weaknesses," Eleonora replied with iron-clad certainty. "And Potter is young, meaning that she hasn't had time to recognise and correct them. In turn, it gives us a chance."

"I would rather prefer we fight her twelve against one, if that's okay with you."

"Two is all we have. Two and all the mushrooms of this level, including the Apex Mushroom."

"Chances?"

"I think we can beat her. And Fortuna will favour no one on this battlefield; it will be our cleverness and the minutes of opportunity at our disposal to shape the battleground that will be critical."

"I would have preferred a stronger assurance," Ambre de Courtois commented drily before nodding. "What exactly do we need?"

For the second time of this Task, Alexandra had to jump from a train.

One couldn't say it was a Curse, but it was really beginning to feel like not a coincidence at all.

Thank the Morrigan and her inner animal for being able to endure so much and regenerate in a few seconds.

Unfortunately, this was just the beginning of the trouble.

A certain Light Champion was waiting for her.

Eleonora da Riva had taken a meditation posture, wand nowhere in sight.

So far, nothing wrong, the Champion of Light was perfectly within her rights to study Buddhist spiritual moves or something else.

Except she was surrounded by mushrooms.

Mushrooms whose caps were pink and looked like inclined umbrellas.

Alexandra didn't know the exact Latin name of these fungi, but she knew what they did: in many magical societies of the Mediterranean, they were used as one of the core ingredients of Love Potions. Alone, the mushrooms were already known as a powerful aphrodisiac.

And last but not least, they were very sensitive to all types of magic.

At the first spell in the vicinity, it would be an avalanche of spores. Whether it was a Killing Curse or a Disarming Charm was immaterial.

The spores would engulf them, and given how many mushrooms there were, it likely would have the potency of a dose of Amortentia.

And being a Hydra Animagus did not make oneself immune to that sort of unconventional assault.

Was the Light Champion immune to it?

It was not impossible.

Eleonora was a Unicorn Animagus; this gave her a large array of skills and blessings. In a straight fight, they weren't as useful as those of a Lernaean Hydra; but in this kind of environment, matters were far more complicated.

"Congratulations, you forced me to run."

The older witch smiled and didn't answer.

"I saw what you did to Cedric. Poor Hufflepuff. I think you destroyed his last hopes to win the Tournament. Do you have no heart?"

There were plenty of laughs in the stands, but alas, Eleonora didn't take the bait.

The Hydra hissed.

"Where is Ambre?"

The French Champion had to be in the forest, but this one was so dense and imbued with so much Herbology-themed magic that there was no hope to locate her.

"You will see."

Alexandra sighed. It really looked like everyone was trying to make this Task difficult for her today.

"Let me remind you that it would be in your best interest to answer."

"Why don't you come closer, in that case?"

The Ravenclaw Champion snorted loudly. Thirty-plus meters separated her from the Champion of Innocence, and she had no intention to get closer than that.

"I will pass," she replied curtly. "Now let me remind you that while I won't cast a spell here and now, I can very much return to the strategy which worked so well on the second level: use a Potion to get rid of the opposition."

"How did you that this, by the way, since the Judges didn't give us cauldrons?"

"We are witches, Innocence. Transfiguration can turn the volva of a mushroom into an acceptable cauldron with some effort."

"As long as the Transfiguration is perfect," the other Champion amended. "Otherwise the 'cauldron' will react with the ingredients. And the Judges didn't tell us we could do it."

"They didn't go ahead and say we couldn't do it either," Alexandra bared her teeth. "And I was not disqualified, so I can proudly say I didn't go against the rules. Now. Where is Amber?"

There was a gust of wind, and suddenly, the entire atmosphere of the Coliseum began to smell like...fish?

Yes, it was extremely pungent smell of fish. Except one which managed to be perceived both as appetising and disgusting.

Her inner animal hissed both in pleasure and in fury. Alexandra's limbs began to twitch.

Her Hydra senses, far above those of a human, were suddenly going haywire.

More smoke blew in her direction, and everything began and ended with this awful smell!

"The King Fisher's Ritual," the Champion of Death spat angrily, "you bitch-"

A large part of the titanic orange mushroom – which had been severed unknown to her in all this smoke – was expelled in her direction and exploded right in her face.

There were a few more seconds of fighting, and then...darkness.

Her last thought before collapsing was that it had really not been a good day for her.

**9 April 1995, Alexandra's Villa, Lands of the Scuola Regina**

Alexandra's groan as she woke up was absolutely *adorable*.

Susan very much regretted immediately that she hadn't had time to bring her new camera this morning.

Bah, there would be other delightful hours where it would be put to good use, she was sure.

"Please tell me it was all a nightmare, Susan," if her voice was any indication, her girlfriend had zero memory loss of her last minutes of participation in the Sixth Task. "Tell me we have to participate in the Tournament in a few minutes, and everything was just a horrible joke of the Twins."

"Sorry, but the Sixth Task was yesterday. You are back in your villa."

"I was in such a bad condition?"

"You were *that* exhausted," the future Lady Bones corrected, touching the warm fingers that had been on the way to transform into claws.

"Ah."

"Yes, ah. If it is any consolation, you finished third. And with everything you had to do, everyone was pleasantly surprised you did manage to get that far. Unlike Sforza and da Riva, you didn't have a clue of what awaited you."

"I find improvising tends to add a lot of spice to a Task." The green eyes turned serpentine before returning to a natural human shape. "I would prefer very much to have all the cards in my hands every time, but I suppose the opposition gets a vote."

There was another groan, and an additional pillow found its way under Alexandra's head.

"Who won?"

"Ambre de Courtois, though she got only two more points than da Riva. Once you were eliminated, they didn't have much trouble dealing with all the explosive mushrooms. The hallucinogens were a more serious obstacle, but they knew the Bubble-Body Charm."

"Figures," the single word was uttered while accompanied by a vigorous shaking of the head.

"You could have transformed into a Hydra at the end."

"To end up as a giant reptile on the receiving end of one of the most powerful Love Potions in existence, one I am not immune to? Oh yes, I am sure the spectacle would have been *hilarious*. Why, a Hydra in heat trying to find her girlfriend while throwing lightning and poison everywhere...everybody would have been *entertained*."

Susan winced. In hindsight, it was better Alexandra had not done it.

"Obviously I have not read the scores of the Task, but that should give me the Tournament's victory by a sufficient margin, no?"

"It should, except the Judges, in my humble opinion, were way too pleased with themselves when the two winners were given their rewards."

"Why am I not that surprised?" The next curses mumbled under her breath certainly involved 'band of sadists' and some well-chosen insults. Plus a few things that were spoken in Parseltongue, and were assuredly not polite.

"I'm sure everything will be fine," the red-haired Hufflepuff said with a big smile.

"I wish I shared your House's superb sense of optimism, my Badger."

Alexandra at last abandoned the pretence she was still going to sleep, throwing the pillows across the room wandlessly, before moving to sit at the edge of her bed.

"It really has been a while since I lost that badly," the Champion of Ravenclaw confessed.

"You couldn't win them all," Susan said before kissing her on the cheek.

It was rare to see her girlfriend so...maybe not vulnerable, but the future Lady Bones didn't see a better word to describe her attitude.

"Deep inside, I know that, but after so many occasions where I was able to end up first or at least complete the Task far ahead of everyone...one begins to feel like a superstar of the competition."

"Hmm...so you will be merciful when it comes to Cedric?"

"Nah," Alex stuck out of her tongue and reacted incredibly predictably. "I'm going to unleash Cho. *She* will be in charge of his punishment."

"That's the definition of cruelty, oh Hydra Queen."

"It is nothing he doesn't deserve, oh Great Badger." Black eyebrows were raised for a couple of seconds before a huff announced the return of seriousness. "Frankly, I understand why they all tried to turn against us, it was pretty much their last chance to win the Tournament. Since they screwed it up and got a lesson of pragmatism from Eleonora da Riva, I don't think it will be necessary to rub salt on the injury. At least I hope it won't."

"Good," the niece of Amelia Bones answered before hesitating. "There have been a lot of revelations with this last Task. And many changes have happened."

Most of them weren't for the better, it went without being said.

"And some didn't."

"Really?"

"Susan, I still have a Dumbledore at the top of my kill-list, it's just not the one I thought of before the beginning of this month..."

"You're incorrigible," the red-haired witch sighed.

"And proud of it!" The Hydra Animagus proclaimed.

The incredible arrogance couldn't be tolerated anymore; fortunately there was a cure to it. A good pillow strike found its mark, generating an outraged sound.

"What did we say about not acting like a certain French diva, *Champion*?"

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

If this scene in front of the school taught her something, it was that she didn't like having her defeat rubbed in her nose.

Alexandra hissed. The sooner this ceremony ended, the better it would be in her opinion.

"Smile, Death. You finished in third place, not last."

"I'm sorry, Chaos," the young Champion retorted. "Is there something to be happy about being rewarded with a prize that includes books on *mushrooms*?"

It went without saying that the Ravenclaw was going to let Hermione borrow them. It was way better than setting them on fire when her temper got the better out of her.

"I admit it's a reasonable argument," the Dark Queen smiled. "But you still got in third place, courtesy of destroying your own ambush."

"Because they didn't commit as many Champions for mine as they did for you," Alexandra noted. "If they had, I would have been defeated much like you were. I certainly didn't see coming."

"Yes, the Champion of Innocence was particularly...ingenious. I am going to have to invent something for the Seventh Task in order to explain how I dislike that kind of ingenuity."

And the voice indicated clearly Lyudmila wasn't joking.

Bah, Eleonora had asked for it. And she would live afterwards. Maybe.

"Deal with her; I will exact retribution on Ambre de Courtois."

Yes, both girls had participated in her defeat, but one was more responsible than the other, and a Champion of Death paid her debts.

"That's acceptable." The Champion of Chaos went silent for a few seconds before clearing her throat. "What do you think of the rankings?"

"That the top scorers and the others are in a different league?"

**Champions Rankings of the Sixth Task**:

**1st Ambre de Courtois – 96 points**

**2nd Eleonora da Riva – 94 points**

**3rd Alexandra Potter – 40 points**

**4th Cedric Diggory – 25 points**

**5th Fleur Delacour – 24 points**

**6th Romeo Malatesti – 20 points**

**7th Lyudmila Romanov – 12 points**

**8th Lucrezia Sforza – 8 points**

**9th ex-aequo Martin Bayard and Angelina Johnson – 5 points**

**11th Ulrich Fuchs and Eugenie Millet – 4 points**

**13th Johann Wolffhart – 3 points**

**14th Viktor Krum – 2 points**

**15th ex-aequo Giovanni Ruspoli and Graham Montague – 0 point**

"It certainly seems that when you're not here to help him, the least gifted of your Champions earn his usual zero."

"It certainly seems so," Alexandra nodded. "Is that why you sent him to the hospital where he is going to stay some six or seven weeks in order to recover?"

"It could be," the Dark Queen bared her fangs. "Or I might have thought it would be funny to use that particular spell."

"The Healers have never seen a counter-curse so difficult to cast, Chaos. Montague was generating mucus from head to toe by the time they stabilised him."

"I wish I could have seen that, unfortunately I was unconscious."

Alexandra sighed.

"I wish I could say Loki is a bad influence, but I'm afraid it is all you."

"Good, you're learning."

"Sometimes I fear I'm going to be called Lady of Cynicism before I'm thirty. What do you think of the total scores?"

"I have lost my second place. You?"

"I was so close to reaching the bar of four hundred points..."

**Champion Rankings after the Sixth Task:**

**1st Alexandra Potter – 390 points**

**2nd Eleonora da Riva – 326 points**

**3rd Lyudmila Romanov – 310 points**

**4th Lucrezia Sforza – 305 points**

**5th Ambre de Courtois – 235 points**

**6th Viktor Krum – 207 points**

**7th Romeo Malatesti – 200 points**

**8th Cedric Diggory – 140 points**

**9th Henri de Condé (suspended) – 134 points**

**10th Fleur Delacour – 100 points**

**11th Giovanni Ruspoli – 65 points**

**12th Angelina Johnson – 58 points**

**13th Martin Bayard – 55 points**

**14th Yegor Poliakov (deceased) – 50 points**

**15th Neville Longbottom (suspended) – 40 points**

**16th Geoffrey Hooper – 39 points**

**17th Frode Falk (deceased) – 35 points**

**18th Armand Coularé de la Fontaine – 24 points**

**19th Graham Montague (not deceased yet) – 21 points**

**20th Lucas Gauthier (deceased) – 19 points**

**21st Johann Wolffhart – 14 points**

**22nd Boris Viipuri – 11 points**

**23rd Eugenie Millet – 10 points**

**24th Ulrich Fuchs – 4 points**

**25th Karl Schumacher (deceased) – 3 points**

**26th ex-aequo: Lorenzo de Medici, Cassius Warrington, and Pyotr Karamnov (all deceased) – 0 point**

"That's all it inspires in you?" the Dark Queen asked, curious.

"Well, I see my pranksters went after Montague again, since he deserved to be punished after his betrayal stunt." Alexandra smiled. "Otherwise, I suppose we can say for sure a witch is going to win the Tournament one way or another."

Viktor Krum was still the first wizard of the rankings, but the gap between their two positions was so colossal it would likely take two or three Tasks to be compensated.

Yeah, in theory it was possible to earn one hundred points per Task, but in practise, one had to remember that even with the Fourth Task not truly properly graded, all the Champions had theoretically the ability to earn some five hundred points since the Tournament began.

Yet no one had reached four hundred so far. It certainly hinted pretty nicely at how difficult the challenges were every time.

"True. Who is your least gifted Champion going to be replaced with, by the way?"

"I don't remember the Slytherin substitute order, and I don't really care," the Champion of Death answered in all honesty. "It's not like we are going to win the interschool competition anyway, and though I'm willing to forgive a lot, the three little betrayers can really go screw themselves now. We tried unity, and it is them who went against me. They may organise a team of cheerleaders or disguise themselves as their House's mascots, I don't really care anymore."

In the end, it was true to say Hogwarts had utterly failed as a school during the European Magical Tournament. Her performance was the exception which should not be taken into account when studying the disaster.

"You're better than my own school, at least. You didn't have your High Master congratulate everyone for turning on each other and acting as a 'pack who will devour the weak'."

"Karkaroff said that to the Champions of Durmstrang?"

"He did."

"I knew there were a lot of reasons I didn't like the bastard...one more to add to the tally, I guess."

All around them, the ceremony continued.

And really this time, one had to admit, it was boring.

It was a significant loss of her precious time. Alexandra wished she was elsewhere. There were plenty of interesting things she could do right now. Creating a new magical map, perhaps? This felt more useful than standing here and reminiscing on how she had been beaten by Innocence and her chief accomplice.

Alexandra yawned.

"And finally, a word from the Honourable Judges!"

Oh, good, it was finally over.

"While there are many things that will be revealed in the days to come to the public and the Scuola Regina in general, we wish to limit ourselves to three announcements today!"

Three? Suddenly, Alexandra's hydra instincts felt something bad coming.

"First of all, the Seventh Task will take place on the seventeenth of June!"

That was...not too bad. Except Montague, everyone should have recovered from the Task, and this left Alexandra plenty of time to pursue a certain Quest involving magical Seals, and preparing to deal with a treacherous Necromancer.

"Like many other competitions, the Coliseum of the Scuola Regina will host the Seventh Task!"

This one, at least, wasn't in the least surprising. Given what had happened during the Fourth Task, plus the Breaking of the Statute, Alexandra could understand the Judges preferred to limit the exposure to the outside world. And when it was impossible to be limited to the Coliseum grounds – looking at you, Broom Race – the Task was to be in areas where there was little chance of collateral damage.

"And finally...for this extraordinary and explosive finale of the European Magical Tournament, the points will be doubled, meaning the winner of the Final Task will have the possibility of earning two hundred points!"

Alexandra for a second wondered if her ears had not betrayed her.

As the thunderous applause exploded everywhere around her, the Champion of the Morrigan experienced the sinking feeling that no, she had understood the last announcement perfectly fine.

"It looks like your victory is not exactly a sure thing anymore, Death."

"They are going to pay for that," Alexandra didn't threaten; it was a heartfelt promise. "They thought me turning into my Animagus form was the worst I could do? They were wrong. I am going to avenge my defeat!"

"And how are you going to do it?" Loki's Chosen laughed.

"Don't worry I have close to two months to prepare something that will achieve legendary infamy."

**11 April 1995, the Art Wing, Scuola Regina**

Romeo Malatesti had heard from several Succubae that the Champion of Death had spent plenty of coins creating maps that represented fictional worlds.

They might have exaggerated a bit, because the map which was drying in the atelier today represented the surroundings of a familiar and sinister Black Pyramid.

Also known as the First Seal, the Seal of Death, and the Graveyard of **Set** by those who were aware of it.

Of course, right now, the Black Pyramid didn't exist per se, and thus the map remained something that 'could be' rather than a very real truth.

It remained quite impressive nonetheless.

The map creator had done a large amount of work on the desert and the dunes, as well as the location of several oases and ancient graves of past Dynasties.

But as beautiful as the details were, the eye always returned to the immense Black Pyramid. There was no explanation necessary, no warnings, and no Runes like there were on other parts of the map.

It was like a particularly vivid nightmare.

It didn't seem to belong to this world, yet it did.

"Malatesti," the British girl didn't turn as he stepped forwards. "It is an unexpected surprise. I don't remember seeing you more than twice in this Art Wing."

"Do I look like Sforza?" the former Champion of Ares joked. "The Arts have always been more the domain of Lucrezia and her small army of cousins. I prefer more *martial* pursuits."

"Duelling, I guess?"

"And fencing," Romeo added. "I'm really high-ranked on the sabre circuit."

"You didn't show it during the Tournament." The tone of the other Champion was almost disappointed. Almost.

"No offence, but I am not so good as to hurl spells and fight sword in hand at the same time. We're not all prodigies of the blade. And I didn't manage to channel magic with anything sharp-edged that didn't involve the metal feathers of my Animagus form."

"Ah," the green eyes of Death turned to stare at him for a couple of heartbeats before looking away. "Well, it's your right and privilege I suppose. In your shoes though, I would try some artistic pursuits. The effort could force you to learn to think strategically before jumping into a dangerous situation."

"It's not that I don't like art, Potter. I have a fondness for heroic statues of bronze, as it happens. I can recognise talent. It's just that I have never found the taste to spend hours on creating an artistic masterpiece. Not everyone can enjoy throwing imperfect canvas and blocks of marble away until they reach perfection."

"I don't know if perfection really exists," the Champion of Hogwarts commented drily.

"Or if we poor mortals would recognise it if we were shown it without someone to scream at us that it is indeed something that should make our little brains explode?"

The point had been made, and there was no counter-argument coming.

As the Hydra continued to stare thoughtfully at her map, Romeo grimaced and knew he would have to make the first step.

"But as interesting as this debate is, I didn't come to discuss the merits of artistic pursuits."

"No, I suppose you didn't. Delacour, the Powers, or the Necromancer?"

Sometimes, one wondered if the Champion of the Morrigan didn't have Seer-like abilities in addition to everything else.

"Fleur Delacour."

There was a loud cackle.

"I'm not sure I am exactly the person who must be spoken with when the subject is *her*."

"She is not that bad."

Alexandra Potter snorted before watching him attentively.

"You *really* are in love with her."

"I...I suppose I am." The admission felt rather easy after the last couple of nights spent thinking about his emotions and his affection for her.

The former Champion of War expected laughter or some vitriolic comments.

Potter merely shrugged.

"Well, it's your decision and your heart. Personally, I don't think I will be able to ever forget her little journey into the realm of Light fanaticism, but that's just me. And really, given the curious choices my parents and my ancestors in general made when it came to their love relationships, I don't think I have any right to throw stones."

"And it is very much appreciated."

His humour managed to obtain a thin smile from the younger girl.

"Besides...I think Delacour likes you, even if she doesn't admit it in public."

"Oh? You know each other so well after your duelling and bickering?"

"No," the Hydra bared her fangs. "I'm just saying that after the Shakespearian comedy that was the Sixth Task, Delacour would have roasted you slowly like a pig if she didn't happen to reciprocate a bit of your feelings."

The words lit some hope in his belly...though as always, there remained plenty of doubts.

"I want to protect her, to let her know she matters to me; that she matters to me more than anything, but..."

"Are you sure I am the Champion you need to talk to?" Alexandra Potter asked, fortunately without laughing at his hesitations. "I mean, I am the Champion of Death, and the Champion of Desire attends this school."

This time it was Romeo's turn to snort.

"In case you haven't noticed, Lucrezia is on the war path since Da Riva managed to pull that one on her during the Sixth Task. I'm certain she would give some advice, oh yes...and that in the next minutes, half of the school would know everything there is to know about my feelings for a lot of girls. A gamble could also be made that one of the pieces of advice would include sleeping with the interested party several times..."

"Don't forget that both Sforza and Delacour have their Seals in the Venetian Lagoon itself. What the first knows, the second will not remain unaware of for long. Unless you think you can keep a secret from the small army of Succubae attending the Scuola Regina?"

"I have not forgotten them, Lady Death."

"Just checking," the younger witch shrugged. "You have quite a dilemma, former Champion of War. That said, Delacour swore herself to Prometheus, and the Titan is hardly an immortal who is keen on respecting the rules."

"Is there a point about this?"

"She likes bad boys. I think."

Romeo grimaced. He would have preferred the last two words to not be spoken.

"And I just fear screwing up everything." He didn't say 'again', but he was sure Potter heard it.

"War," the girl who had ended the life of Ra mused. "You think that if you try to reconquer the title of Champion, your relationship will not survive."

"I'm pretty sure there will be a marriage in the short-term future," Romeo Malatesti agreed with the statement. "Unfortunately, I can't help but think the divorce would follow in a matter of days. War was **Blood**."

And like every Power, if nothing was done, it would return to the alignment and Plane it was once part of.

"There is some common ground to be found under the sheets with blood, but it is far more frequent to see it in duels, or on the battlefield. And you can always play with the words, but it remains **War**."

"You want Metal, and you want a different Power."

Romeo gaped.

"How did you-"

"The element of Metal is flexible, and you're already a Stymphalian Bird. It wasn't really difficult to arrive at that conclusion." Potter smirked. "Of course, you need my permission, since the ancient Plane of Death was Metal."

"Yes."

"It could work." The Champion of Death wasn't the type to utter lies or shout promises that fell apart a second later, so it was reassuring. "You would certainly get more flexible and more...synchronised with your Juliet, if it is indeed your desire. That said, it still represents a big danger."

"Potter, I think that if we don't push forwards our claims, the Necromancer will try to name other Champions in our stead."

"The possibility can't be missed, but I was more thinking of the fact that every Seal had several Knights of the Exchequer working upon it. And while the Necromancer was the youngest of the twelve, she still was a Knight."

As much as he wanted to say Death was too paranoid, the danger couldn't be dismissed out of hand.

"Lust and Desire walk hand in hand, so we would need to find something close...something like **Strife**." The Hydra mused and hissed at the same time. "Yes, it could work. Maybe. There's however something that will entirely fall upon you to accomplish."

"And it is?"

The green-eyed girl raised her eyes to watch the Black Pyramid again, but Romeo felt the exasperation radiating out of her.

"Well, you're going to have to admit your feelings to Fleur Delacour, of course. I am not signing for a new edition of *Romeo and Juliet* on top of a volcano a thousand metres above the sea level. I am not. Not in a thousand years. I know it will end fatally with me pushing Delacour from a cliff after she murdered you, in addition with a Seal blowing up and accelerating the countdown to Ragnarok."

"Now you're completely exaggerating. There's no way it would end that badly!"

Emerald green eyes glared at him.

"Do I need to remember out loud who exactly was forced to build an altar to Sobek with his bare hands? Oh, and by the way, all my friends think the crocodile statue you commissioned is hilarious. Just saying..."

**11 April 1995, Alexandra's Villa, Lands of the Scuola Regina**

"That aside, I have good news for you, Hermione."

"Really?"

"Really. I was able to get you a nice birthday present."

"Alex, my birthday is on the nineteenth of September."

The Champion of Death shrugged unapologetically.

"If you want, you can wait for the nineteenth of September to enjoy it. There isn't any problem with that."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Would I?" it was often way too easy to rouse her bushy-haired friend's temper.

"No, you wouldn't!"

"Ah, I suppose I couldn't, after all-"

"Alex," Morag said with a real dose of exasperation. "Are you going to tell us what you have in mind for Hermione's present, or must we begin to cast the Tickling Charm to loosen your tongue?"

"I am above any form of tickling," the Hydra Animagus sniffed disdainfully before hurrying to not verify if the MacDougal Heiress would execute her threat. "Fine. It took more time than I wanted, but Hermione will be allowed to visit the Alexandria Library. The not-so-dangerous levels that aren't closed to the common mages of the Exchequer, anyway."

"THANK YOU, ALEX! THANK YOU-"

It was...a weird experience to have Hermione hugging you like there was no tomorrow.

Strange, but not unpleasant.

Hermione rushed away in excitement, letting her face another Ravenclaw's amused stare.

"Only one?"

"The invitations are slow and the Exchequer is by nature cautious. With Hermione, I suppose they thought the risks very manageable."

"You mean she doesn't have any family in politics, and the greatest risk is that she forgets to eat and drink while in the Alexandria Library."

Alexandra rolled her eyes.

"It's a bit blunt, but yeah, I think that's a fair assessment."

The two witches watched each other for long seconds without a sound being exchanged.

"What are you going to do with your main problem?"

"Arianna Dumbledore? I think I told the world what my intentions are. If she wanted to survive for centuries, she should have known better than give such a challenge to the Champion of Death."

"The megalomaniac sister of our hypocritical ex-Headmaster is not your main problem, Alex. The Champions and your own future are."

"Touché," the Lady Protector closed her eyes. "You know, when Osiris temporarily saved us from an immediate apocalyptic war, I thought we would have at least one year or two before all kind of crises slammed into our faces."

Ah, if only they had gotten seven years. If only...but they didn't have them. They had three, the countdown had already begun, and worse, it seemed the threats could come from all directions.

"I wish we could have some sort of normal school years too," Morag replied. "Well, normal by a sane Ravenclaw's standards, not yours."

"My standards are very fine, thank you." Alexandra tried to sneer.

"Alex, your standards think it is perfectly fine to organise a little conquest of Hogwarts when you have free time."

The worst part was when your friend tended to point out the evidence, and you couldn't deny it.

"I guess this is true," the Champion of the Morrigan acknowledged. "Any other pearls of wisdom?"

"You don't intend to stay within the darkness."

The Lady Protector of the Isles raised an ironic eyebrow.

"It would likely involve a duel to the death with Lyudmila, and I'm afraid I don't value the Dark enough to go with that kind of hare-brained scheme, thank you very much."

She went on to fill up more orange juice for herself, before pouring more for Morag too.

"It's the same key reason why the Light is out of the question, though in this case, I wasn't even tempted to begin with. Moreover, Fire and Water are already attributed. That removes quite a few options. For the rest...I suppose I'm going to wait and study."

"The proverb is 'wait and see'."

"Not for Ravenclaws."

Morag huffed loudly.

"Fine! But you better find me a good birthday present for my birthday!"

"Your birthday is in March, Morag, it was almost yesterday! I think I have time to be prepared for it..."

The two Ravenclaws chuckled.

"Do you intend to do something as risky as the thing you intend to support Malatesti with?"

"That seems unlikely." Alexandra shook her head. "Death is Death, in the end. You can try to change the name, you can pray to a different Aspect of the Power...but it all stays the same at the end of the journey."

"Thus we must enjoy life to the fullest while we can."

"Truer words have never been spoken, Morag."

"And win the European Magical Tournament in a fishy manner while you're at it, of course!"

The Hydra Animagus hissed in despair.

"If I had known how many jokes my defeat would create, I would have put far more effort into discovering the exact scenario of the Sixth Task..."

**Author's note**: The adventure of the Champions of Magic and Alexandra Potter will continue in the next chapter, which may be tentatively titled *April of Strife*.

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