**Chapter 89**

**New Classes and Enigmas**

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

There had been a lot of whispers from the Gryffindors once the news had spread that Alexandra, Susan, and Hermione would attend the third-year Dark Arts class of the Scuola Regina. Ron Weasley had of course repeated his usual stance about Dark Ladies and dancing in the middle of a field of corpses, while Leo Black proclaimed they were going to sacrifice disobedient students and drink their blood in bone cups.

The reality, clearly, was far more disappointing.

It was a classroom. It was very luminous, despite the cloudy weather of the day. There were paintings of old wizards moving from portrait to portrait, the only difference between Hogwarts and here being their Italian or Venetian-themed clothes.

The desks and chairs they used were clearly more recent and more comfortable than what was the norm at Hogwarts too.

But aside from that? The classroom was surprisingly normal. If anything, the students were more unconventional than the location itself. Two seats to Susan's right, there was a young centaur. And several boys behind her were obviously wereleopards or some variation of were-feline. She was almost sure the girl Hermione was staring at was a siren – the way she regularly gathered a bubble around her wandlessly proved it.

Aside from that, Dark Arts class looked pretty normal.

Well, until the door opened and Professor Enzo Tacchinelli entered.

Alexandra had been warned, but still, seeing an Incubus walk in without bothering with any 'human disguise' like most she had seen was going to take time to get used to.

"Good morning, class," the black-skinned demonic-looking teacher greeted them, "as you can see, we have several new students with us today."

"You hinted there would be more, Professor," the centaur boy spoke.

"Not everyone was acknowledged as proficient enough to join my class," the black-winged being smiled pleasantly.

Yeah, the majority of the Slytherins – Blaise had not applied, but he was the exception – had not been happy knowing that if they wanted to go to a Dark Arts-class, they would need to begin with the second year’s teachings, not the third or the fourth year’s.

"And since the three new students we welcome here today missed my first lecture, I will reiterate what I said before: the homework I give on a weekly basis is primordial...and extremely theoretical. I am a responsible teacher, and the field of magic I give you the fundamentals of can be extremely dangerous to yourself and others if used incorrectly. Most spells in your mandatory book must only be tested against the dummies of this classroom or in one of the warded chambers of this school, and never against a magical citizen of our fair Republic."

Alexandra had a feeling the Slytherins would have hated this class if they had successfully tested for it.

"Now let's begin today's class." The Incubus Professor didn't call out their names, but the Potter Heiress had a feeling that the magical 'demon' knew exactly who was missing, courtesy of two empty chairs. "Today we are going to speak about the Unforgivables and how they tend to be regulated by the ICW and various international Ministries."

First lesson and they were already on the Unforgivables? Damn...

"Champion Potter. Would you please inform us what the legal definition is for Unforgivables on British shores, and which spells fall under it?"

"Of course, Professor," the green-eyed witch cleared her throat. "The curses designated as 'Unforgivable' were labelled as such in 1717 by the British Ministry. As far as I know, their only legal claim to be acknowledged as such is the automatic punishment they carry if you are witnessed using one on another wizard or witch: a life-time sentence in Azkaban Prison."

"Indeed," Professor Enzo Tacchinelli nodded gravely, all trace of positive emotions absent from his face. "And the spells themselves?"

"Imperio, the Imperius Curse. Cruciatus, the Torture Curse. Avada Kedavra, the Killing Curse."

"Very good," the Incubus replied approvingly.

"But, Professor..." one of the feline skinchangers, a boy with improbable striped yellow hair, said plaintively, "surely that's not right! The Imperius is not even a Curse! It is a Light Subjugation-"

"-Spell which has a Light and a Dark incantation," the red-eyed Professor finished with a disappointed expression towards his student. "Keep this in mind, Agostino."

"Yes, Professor."

"Other comments about the British Ministry's Unforgivable classification?" It was a nice change to see a Professor invite some debate...it almost never happened except in Professor Flitwick's class.

"Yes, Professor," this time it was the Siren-in-human-form who spoke. "Surely the true list of Unforgivables can't be that small? I know the Founding Houses of Venetia classified more than one hundred spells as Unforgivables, and over twenty were added after Grindelwald's War. And no offence to the new students, but...the Cruciatus Curse is the only real Curse I would say belongs in the Unforgivable category."

"I am glad to hear you say it," the Dark Arts teacher said ironically, "given that it was placed on this government's list three years after London declared it forbidden."

The Incubus looked at each person inside the classroom with the sort of expression usually reserved for survivors of long battles.

When he spoke again, there was no amusement in his voice.

"But Elodia is correct. Of these three Curses, only the Cruciatus is considered Unforgivable by the Italian and Venetian governments. Since we are civilised enough to refuse handing over citizens to soul-sucking demons, the Cruciatus, if cast against another citizen or a non-magical being, results in a death sentence. And there's a good reason for it. Uttering the incantation in a moment of despair is not enough. Throwing enough power at the problem is not enough. To truly cast the Cruciatus, you have to utterly hate someone, and be willing to make him experience excruciating torment. There is no counter-curse, and the side-effects are terrific on the target. Many prestigious magical practitioners have taken their own lives after being tortured by the Cruciatus."

Professor Enzo Tacchinelli wrote the name on the enchanted board with a twirl of his wand before turning towards them.

"I will not teach you how to cast it. You will learn, however, how to protect you and those you love from this Curse. That there are no counter-curses does not mean that plenty of methods have been imagined in the previous centuries to prevent the torture spell from bringing you to insanity. Fortunately for all law-abiding citizens, the wand movements are complicated, and the spell is relatively impractical to cast within a few seconds, making it a liability in an illegal duel or any other type of battle confrontation."

The Incubus stared at her.

"As for the other two British Unforgivables, that they are not recognised as such here does not mean they are not under severe regulations. Any use of the Killing Curse which is not in legitimate self-defence will condemn you to a minimum of twenty years of prison, and the Imperius carries a longer sentence. And yes, this includes the Light variant of the Imperius. Sadly, it is not a fact that has generated much debate over the last decades, but a third of the Venetian Unforgivables are Light-based spells, rituals, and incantations. Now I want someone to describe for me one of those Unforgivables...a Dark one, please, we are after all in the class of Dark Arts."

"The Phylactery Ritual?" the centaur boy proposed. "Not only does it involve Soul and Death Magic, the Dark Wizard willing to use it must commit six murders."

"Yes, the Phylactery Ritual is an Unforgivable. It was among the spells which were officially proscribed when the Venetian Ministry was founded. Evidently, it was not a ritual which was tolerated before either. But the roots of these immortality-seeking rituals have survived the decadence of Ancient Keter, and Dark wizards and witches have long spread the knowledge of them beyond their shores. Now does anyone..."

After a few minutes, Alexandra realized what was disturbing her, aside from the normality of discussing Dark Arts in a very banal manner.

There were no House Points or anything like it in the halls of the Scuola Regina.

**9 November 1994, Art Wing, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"Susan, I forbid you from laughing at my extraordinary first attempt at creating peerless pottery."

Predictably, her injunction failed utterly. Her girlfriend was already giggling, and it became full-blown laughter shortly after that.

"I'm sorry, but your attempt at creating a jar has failed."

"I didn't try to create a jar, I made a teapot!" Alexandra stuck out her tongue...and made the Bones Heiress laugh louder.

"It isn't funny!"

"It is. Who knew a Potter would do so many 'incredible' things with a magical *potter's wheel*?"

Alexandra plunged her hands into the clay one more time before raising them again in their brown glory.

"I can do more incredible things, you know. Like giving you a clay bath."

"Nah, you like me too much." And Susan kissed her, something which never failed to stop any vengeance and retribution attempt.

"Okay, you win, you win..." the Champion of Ravenclaw sighed. "Is my teapot attempt so bad?"

"I'm afraid to say it is..." Susan coughed, "but look at it positively, it's a difficult form of art, and I think a lot of people with far more experience than you are trying and failing to create something beautiful."

Alexandra looked sadly at the...okay it was really something weird she had created. The clay was taking a shape which reminded her of a snake having eaten something too big and now trying to digest it one way or another.

"I'm still surprised you tried pottery so quickly," the Hufflepuff girl continued. "You know, with the time you're spending admiring the paintings and the painted ceilings of this school."

"So eager to see me ruin painting tools and a few canvases, Susan?" the green-eyed Heiress sniffed haughtily.

"No, but you told me yourself your mother is a very good painter, so..."

"My mother is my mother, and while I freely admit I love watching painting, I don't know if I have the...motivation to manipulate pencils for days with a single picture in mind."

"All art is in part about visualisation."

"That's true, but I felt no connections between the paint and myself when I tried an hour ago. It was like whatever I did, the blank canvas was fighting me every step of the way."

"Well, you're just beginning."

"It isn't like that..." Unlike many things in 'normal' classes, it was difficult to find the correct words to describe her feelings about how right or wrong some deeds resonated within her. "What I felt making and manipulating the clay is somehow...right. And painting feels like I am wrong, that I am missing something important."

"Maybe because you're not painting with your tongue."

"Ha. Ha. Ha. You're absolutely unrepentant today, my Badger."

"I am absolutely guilty of that," Susan immediately affirmed, not missing a beat. "Don't worry, if it's your calling, you will begin to improve quickly. Our stallion-professor was very supportive about it."

Some people would have believed it to be an insult, but the pottery teacher of the Scuola Regina was a horse Animagus – not a werehorse, though there were some attending the school – and sometimes changed in front of his students. And without tearing off his clothes, please. Life was really unfair; if she tried to transform into a Hydra without removing her clothes first, she would end up naked at the end of the cycle of Animagus transformation.

"I know. The problem is...I don't have a lot of time for extra-curricular activities this month. The 'Tournament Clue' is extremely difficult to crack."

"So I heard," the redhead witch nodded. "We have already heard Cedric complain loudly and stare at the copy of your script like an Inferius in front of its gravestone."

The comparison gave her the urge to snicker and make a few wild movements...which might not be the brightest move ever as she had sticky clay up to her forearms.

"Too bad it sums up that our extracurricular activities can be fun, but ultimately they aren't the priority as long as the Tournament is around."

"I understand," the Bones Heiress waved her immaculately clean hand, "it's rather unlikely the Judges will decide to organise a challenge of pottery or something involving painting during a Task."

"That would be the day," Alexandra snickered. "Can you imagine Judge Ben Qassim trying to explain to the Dark Queen that to crush us, she will have to make a porcelain artwork worthy of her father's palace?"

Both girls chuckled at the hypothetical reaction of the blonde Russian being 'challenged' like that. Either she would gape for long minutes, or she would try to incinerate the Judge.

"Maybe the Dark Queen is a patron of the arts."

The Champion of the Morrigan gave her girlfriend an expression of disbelief.

"Susan, while I realise I'm not exactly someone who has painted or done something really artistic beyond harvesting animal parts, I don't really think Lyudmila Romanov has any interest in arts which are not...the Dark Arts." Alexandra glanced left where a Beauxbatons boy – not one of the titular Champions – had what looked like a miniature clay castle collapse on itself in a slow and dramatic way. "Surely you have noticed that of all the schools participating in the Tournament, the only one which hasn't sent students to Arts class is Durmstrang."

"They might have their own artistic preferences..."

"Like drinking in skulls and painting the canvas red with the blood of their enemies?"

"That's what Leo Black is believing about all the Dark Ladies, you know..."

"I have to give the idiot points for consistency if nothing else," Alexandra replied lightly while removing her hands from her first – failed – attempt at creating passable pottery. "Okay, it's your turn."

"Me?"

"You." The Hydra Animagus stuck out her tongue. "Let's see how you fare now that I have proudly verified that being a Potter doesn't give you magical insight into how to make pottery, my dear Badger."

"It isn't fair," Susan pouted and tried to kiss her.

"Pottery, then kisses," she avoided the lips by an inch or two. "I want to see what sort of 'jar' your dangerous hands will create..."

"I'm sure it will be better than your teapot..." the redhead mumbled.

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

Her schedule was very different compared to what it had been at Hogwarts. First, there were the fundamental classes or electives she was doing in self-study with her Hogwarts teachers' supervision: Charms, Runes, DADA, and History. Okay, for the latter two it was a lie. She was definitely self-studying the fourth-year course and above, but without sending a single owl message back to Britain.

There was the class she had more or less abandoned: Astronomy. Sorry, Professor Sinistra, but when you faced a Leviathan or another beast classed at least 'XXXXX', the Potter Heiress didn't think it was going to be really useful to know where Mars was in the sky, and which influence the moons of Saturn would eventually have on the weather. By the way, why was Astronomy still a core class? One of the rare common points between the different schools – and yes, she asked – was that Astronomy was always an elective in their castles.

There were the classes where she attended as a 'normal' student among the Venetian students: Transfiguration and Spell-Creation. The latter was just Arithmancy, but she was doing it with the third-years, much like she attended Dark Arts with people one year younger than her.

Was it humiliating? Not really. It wasn't her fault Dumbledore had screwed Hogwarts' curriculum so badly there was no option but to accept you hadn't the level to attend a fourth-year class at the Scuola Regina. At least unlike in Britain, if you proved you had mastered the year's lore and spells, you could go one year above your current level.

Dark Arts and Arts were the two new classes she had never taken before, though the former was evidently a Darker version of DADA as it should have been taught to them year after year.

And in Herbology and Potions, Alexandra was supposed to be taught by Professor Slughorn.

'Supposed to', because entering the well-furbished Potions classroom, the Ravenclaw Champion knew she wasn't going to be taught by Slughorn today. Not unless the member of the Exchequer had found a way to use Polyjuice to look like a redhead female vampire.

"My tutor had another commitment?" she asked her mother, who was levitating a series of vials and pouring various substances into them with impressive facility.

"Yes, the Judges decided they wanted a...significant increase in the number of Sleeping Potions they wanted to be delivered for the Tournament.”

"Wonderful," Alexandra rolled her eyes. "How many super-crocodiles are we talking about? One hundred? Two hundred?"

"Now, now," her mother gave her a smile with a lot of fangs, "I am not authorised to reveal to you the intricacies of the Second Task. That would be cheating."

The green-eyed witch gave her unimpressed stare.

"Please repeat that twice seriously without laughing." Cheating was the honoured tradition of the Tournament. According to the large rumour mill of the Venetians, several agents of Karkaroff had already been caught and expelled from the school's grounds trying to do exactly that.

Lilian Evans gave her a sardonic smile.

"You know, I can't...daughter." Then the female vampire grimaced. "Jokes aside, I don't know much about the Second Task. I suspect that all the animals you will meet in this Task are more for the spectators than for the Champions, but this is a suspicion, nothing more. Unlike the First Task, I am not involved in the preparations."

That was interesting, all right. Alexandra had had a lot of confirmations her mother's specialties were Blood Magic/Thaumaturgy, Enchanting, and Potions, and her level in Charms and Herbology had to be nothing to scoff at too. This didn't invalidate Runes at all.

"If it's the best thing I'm going to get, I will accept it," the black-haired teenager said philosophically. "What are we working upon today?"

"Imhotep's Reagent," her mother said innocently.

"But that is-"

"A Potion which once coated on Runes, protects them for several centuries? Yes, it is. And it is rather basic for someone who has mastered the fourth-year Potions curriculum."

Reading between the lines, they wouldn't be so busy that they couldn't converse as the Potion was brewed.

Of course, this rather suggested Slughorn's 'commitment' was not as unanticipated as it was hinted, since the Potions Master was many things, but eager to give her easy Potions assignments was not among them.

"Then let's begin." The current leader of the Tournament nodded while casting powerful Cleaning Charms and other spells always associated with pre-brewing preparations.

"Yes, let's begin...what it is this I've heard about my daughter kissing another redhead student in pottery class, by the way?"

In hindsight, maybe brewing the Potion was not going to be that easy. Not if she was going to blush madly and almost die of embarrassment before the two hours were out...

**12 November 1994, Alexandra's villa, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"I'm beginning to think," Alexandra levitated her quill before she did something regrettable with it, "the Judges had a lot of fun preparing these eternally-cursed Tournament Clues."

"Now, now, Alex," Morag chided her, "what could possibly make you think that?"

"Maybe the fact the first one we receive is a complex enigma?" the Ravenclaw Champion said sarcastically. "The more I think about it, the more I wonder if not having the Tournament Clue is such a handicap."

"You wouldn't know what awaits you for the Second Task," Hermione pointed out, raising her head from the books listing Egyptian deities.

"But I wouldn't spend so many hours trying to decipher it instead of doing Rune self-studying or something equally important," the black-haired Basilisk-Slayer replied.

Strangely, her two friends didn't intervene to tell her she was wrong.

"Well, nothing to do but to continue searching."

"Let's see the positive side," Morag tried to cheer her up. "You have found one of the three names you needed."

"What an exploit it is..." Alexandra snorted, giving a glance at the cartouche she had filled in her first attempt.

*Sobek*

"It's more or less the confirmation the 'animals' which will be 'invited' to the Second Task will be those enormous crocodiles Morgana La Fay is so fond of. But it was the easy one. The other enigmas are far too vague. It could be any deity among a list of one hundred. Hell, even Sobek technically solves the other enigmas: aside from being the God of Crocodiles, he's also the Guardian of the Solar Barque, the God of Water and Fertility, and plenty of other divine prerogatives."

The Egyptian civilisation had lasted for so long that their cults' limits were rather blurry and difficult to ascertain. Compared to them, the Greeks and the Romans were amateurs. Horus could be indifferently the son, the brother, and the husband of Isis. Sobek could be the noble warrior or the great big bad – if you didn't count Apophis – or something in-between.

This was so bad she nearly had a headache just thinking about it.

"Daphne has found several interesting Hieroglyph curses which are versatile enough I think I will be able to use whatever the Judges have in mind for us, but it's far better if I find out what they have decided to throw us into."

"In that case," Hermione said thoughtfully, "it's better to admit we can study the Egyptian Gods and Goddesses for a few decades and not find the answer to these enigmas. Not with only seven attempts for every 'divine' cartouche."

"I kind of agree, but what alternative does it leave?"

"We need to guess correctly what kind of challenges the Judges want all the Champions to face during the Second Task. You guessed correctly with Sobek because you had a bad feeling about the Exchequer's crocodiles."

"Yes, I did, but it's not exactly like I can go asking every Judge who they have contacted for the December Task."

"That's not what Hermione is saying." Morag said. "Rather try to imagine how they are going to use said crocodiles since your mother told you they won't be more than spectacular distractions."

The Champion of Morrigan tried to think about it...and arrived at an unpleasant conclusion.

"A moat," the Hydra Animagus grimaced, "they're going to partially flood the Coliseum again, except this time it will be small-scale and the crocodile-filled lake will just be the first obstacle to cross before we deal with whatever is in the middle of the arena. Maybe a Temple or something else?"

"If they go for the Egyptian theme this time, shouldn't it be a Pyramid?"

"Yes," Alexandra said carefully as she considered the point Hermione had made. "Of course, it could be a temple or a more conventional 'tomb' too."

"But if we add this to the enigma, we need a protector, and a deity associated with the dead."

"Bastet," Morag spoke and the two other Ravenclaws stared at her. "It fits, no? I doubt they intend to bring cats into whatever structure they build inside the Coliseum, and the Goddess is among the major figures of the Egyptian Pantheon."

"It fits," Alexandra confirmed, summoning her quill and grabbing the papyrus. "Here we go..."

Writing the three hieroglyphs was not complicated, though Alexandra took care to leave open the rune dictionary next to her. It would be stupid to make a vocabulary mistake and waste an attempt because of it.

The name of the Goddess of Cats, Protector of Women, Children, Home, and Necropolises flashed in a bright, magical gold, before fading and taking on a reddish colour much like Sobek had.

"Congratulations, Morag. You will be able to eat your dinner tonight, see how generous I am?"

"Thank you, oh tyrant of lightning and emeralds," the Irish Heiress bowed and bowed again until there was no doubt she was being ridiculous in the extreme.

"That leaves the third cartouche," Alexandra sighed, deciding to ignore Morag's gestures after ten good seconds. "And I have no idea what may be waiting inside the 'pyramid-temple'. A monster? A succession of traps?"

"The succession of traps is likelier," Hermione answered. "They will already have the crocodiles waiting outside, it isn't like they need more bloodthirsty beasts, no?"

"And there's also the whole fact the First Task was about raw power. It would make sense if one needed cleverness instead of beating whatever poor misunderstood animals stands in your way."

"Anubis would fit, he's after the guardian of the dead and many sanctuaries..."

But for the first time, the name of the God she wrote was erased in a bright flash of red.

"Not Anubis, then."

"Traps and architecture, cleverness..." Hermione whispered before fixing upon another name in the pages opened before her. "What about Thoth, the God of the Moon, Wisdom, and Magic?"

"The Ibis God..." Alexandra narrowed her eyes. "Isn't he also the God of Hieroglyphs?"

"He is in half of the Dynasties which reigned over Egypt."

"Well here goes nothing..."

Alexandra wrote 'Thoth' in its Hieroglyphs...and to her relief, the parchment flashed gold.

"Yes!" Morag exclaimed.

Alexandra didn't jump in joy, though. The long columns of hieroglyphs were changing, but it was more Egyptian glyphs replacing the old ones, and after a couple of seconds, the 'divine' cartouches disappeared, and three new ones appeared, all empty.

They had researched the list of Gods for so many hours...and it just happened that it was the first 'Hieroglyph enigma' of at least two to be solved before the Second Task began.

All her self-control was not enough.

"Let it be known to all: I fucking hate these Tournaments Clues."

"Language!"

**13 November 1994, Abydos, Egypt**

The beast was three metres-long, and had the height of a small dog. It had been impaled on over two dozen Light enchanted weapons to confirm beyond doubt it was dead.

And it had absolutely no reason to be here in this day and age. It was an extinct species.

Unfortunately, the black and dark green scales, the enormous fangs, and the aura of Death magic which lingered after it was permanently neutralised left little room for doubt and designation.

"It is a Spawn of Apophis, yes," the Archmage of the Light confirmed to the members of Strike Force Cathar. "A young one, evidently, but the Dark aura is unmistakeable and I personally killed the last nest more than one thousand years ago."

Damn Osiris. The extermination of this monstrous species had been something which had bolstered the Light reputation to new heights and generated enormous good will over North Africa and beyond. By the golden hooves of the sacred unicorns, wiping out those creatures had been something several *Dark wizards and witches* of the time had approved and cheered on!

"We found only this one with the Ward of Absolute Localisation, Lord Archmage."

"There will be more. Once they are born, these...Vipers...are extremely violent to each other until they have reached the age of mating the conventional way and their adult size. And before you ask, yes, the Spawns of Apophis are excellent swimmers. They undoubtedly used the Nile to spread across Egypt."

"Err...yes, Lord Archmage. It is possible it was a sterile one which has escaped the extinction procedures and was dug up by the hundreds of Muggle building projects existing all around."

"I would have hesitated to believe it in the best of circumstances. But since the enemy insulted us by resurrecting at Abydos of all locations, I think we can safely discard the 'coincidence' possibility."

"Yes, Lord Archmage," the second-in-command of the Strike Force nodded with an expression of understanding. Unlike his superior, he had visibly assimilated more lore about the country. "Abydos was the heart of the Cult of Osiris thousands of years ago. Building the First Seal here added insult to the breach of the Statute."

And it wasn't a small insult, though he wasn't going to acknowledge it to the Knights of the Army of Light around him. When the Romans lost Egypt, he had spent several years destroying Exchequer bases from Alexandria to the Nile. Knowing they had rebuilt immediately after he was gone was an unpleasant revelation.

"But Lord Archmage," one of the Spanish witches who had recently sworn her full vows asked, "what is the point of resurrecting this dangerous breed of Dark Snakes? They are undoubtedly going to kill plenty of Muggles and create a crisis for the Statute of Secrecy. But-"

"But first-rate wards are sufficient to make sure they don't attack wizards and witches inside their own homes or at work." Ra finished. "Yes, it is a good point."

What was Osiris after, by returning the Spawns of Apophis from the pits of extinction they should never have returned from? It couldn't be the mass killing of Muggles. As much as the ancient Avatar of Light hated to admit it, Osiris could kill millions in a couple of days if he really decided to go to war.

"I don't think it is about Death at all," the Archmage spoke after a good minute of trying to assess where the illusion was and where the truth lied. "The Dark servant of Death triggered the Seal, and I don't think it is a coincidence."

"That is...worrying." One of the male Knights commented. "Does it mean this Seal was always supposed to be triggered by Death or would a different Dark Beast have crawled out of the darkness if a different Dark Champion killed Lorenzo de Medici?"

That was an interesting question, wasn't it?

"My heart wants to believe it's the former. My head tells me the latter is exactly the sort of ugly trick our enemies love to use in order to cause maximum damage."

And if it was the latter, this meant his demented brother had somehow managed to secure six specimens of Dark creatures which had been rendered extinct by his soldiers in the last millennia.

For the sake of this world, Ra dearly hoped it was the former option. The alternative would destroy the Statute of Secrecy in short order, especially if the Dark blades of Osiris intended to spread dark monsters once per month.

"Find me those beasts, Strike Force Cathar. Find them...and I will come in person to exterminate them."

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

Hermione was beginning to be very annoyed, and the more she thought about it, the more she knew Alexandra had a point.

Solving this Tournament Clue was a huge chore.

Seriously, couldn't the Judges imagine something which left them a lot of days to prepare strategies for the Second Task? At this pace, if there was one more enigma to solve after the second one, Hermione knew it would be better to stop the enigma-solving process and self-study.

A lot of the information they had was optimistic hypotheses and wild guesses, but it was better than nothing. And Alexandra could fight her way through a lake of crocodiles if she had to. The magical animals of the Exchequer were tough and dangerous, but they would be unable to face a lightning-spitting Hydra.

"But I would have preferred there was nothing after this first enigma," the Muggle-born witch whispered to herself as she saluted the Succubus librarian and went into the shelves where all information on the Egyptian culture awaited.

Researching the multitude of African Gods had been exhausting, and to make it more frustrating, it was more a series of deductions and guesses which had allowed them to solve the problem, not so much the knowledge of the books.

Now they had to do the same thing again, but with male and female Pharaohs this time.

Yes, all the Pharaohs. And now that she read the pre-Statute history no library of London offered to its readers, Hermione was very much aware that there were hundreds of Gods...but there had been thousands of rulers, and that was not counting when Egypt had been divided in two with a Light Ruler in the Nile Delta and a Dark Pharaoh at Luxor, or vice-versa.

The Exiled had tried the game of guesses, and 'what are we likely to face this time?'. The big problem with that was that neither Alexandra nor anyone among House Ravenclaw was a historian of Magical Egypt.

They knew a few names like Ramses, but their knowledge was not so much incomplete as utterly empty. Thank you, Professors Binns and Tiroflan, for eternally droning on about Goblin Rebellions and other useless things while avoiding pretty much every topic which could be important or interesting.

Knowing Ulrok the Ever-Bloody killed two hundred wizards near five hundred years ago may give them a few points when they passed the OWLs, but Hermione hadn't even known Ramses II was famous for his battlefield-scale illusions which had allowed him to defeat countless enemies while being massively outnumbered.

In conclusion, the History classes of Hogwarts were absolutely useless.

At least now the bushy-haired Ravenclaw could remedy that. The Scuola Regina's library was immense, and unlike at Hogwarts, was neatly ordered with a helpful librarian and large staff. Once again, the Scuola Regina was beating Hogwarts without trying.

Hermione had to take a few steps aside to lean against the shelves as several Durmstrang students stormed out of the Egyptian section. They had large piles of books in their hands, but they didn't appear to be happy at all. Weird. And wasn't one of them the Champion who had failed against the Chimera. Karl...Schumacher, yes that was his name.

To her surprise, the section wasn't empty once she turned the corner. There was one more Durmstrang Champion, not the Dark Queen thankfully, the 'famous' Quidditch player. Dark eyes fixed on her for a few seconds, before returning to the examination of the countless books describing magical and non-magical practises during the Egyptian Antiquity.

"Your Champion's stratagem was successful with Schumacher, you know," the Bulgarian boy told her as she began searching for a book which would give her a list of the most powerful wizards and witches of the different Dynasties.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Hermione replied in French, since he had first spoken in that language.

Anyway, after the first enigma was revealed not to be the end of the 'Clue search', the Exiled had unanimously decided to stop the mind games. It was...childish, and they had better things to do. Besides, it was far from guaranteed they would solve the 'Tournament Clue' before the Second Task's day came.

"Of course," Hermione didn't know the older boy, but she could recognise an ironic answer.

"Even if we were successful with him," the former Gryffindor spoke after twenty or thirty seconds of search, "we weren't with you."

Because the Bulgarian student looked like he was reading one of the Hieroglyph Dictionaries Alexandra had borrowed herself.

"I am not trying to solve the Clue, no," the athletic Champion admitted. "What would be the point? I did not complete the First Task. Either Lyudmila Romanov will take me the information I have in exchange for a favour, or she won't. In both cases, I can't do anything about it."

"Hmm..." that was not something Alexandra had ever said. But her friend had recovered her Tournament Clue, unlike the Quidditch player, so their strategy had to be markedly different the moment the First Task was over. "The Dark Queen...err...is not someone very friendly."

"She is a Dark Lady." The Durmstrang student smirked. "So no, she is not friendly at all. But she was born in an Imperial House too. She knows the importance of having famous people singing her praises...or not opposing her in politics."

The athletic boy shrugged.

"I will wait and see. In the worst of cases, I can always say I tried my best and forfeit. The penalties are only about money, and people will forgive me if I can't use a broom. Because that's the only thing they expect of me."

It was said with a smile, but Alexandra used the same tone sometimes when she wanted to evade things about her childhood.

"Without betraying anything my Champion told me, I don't think this Task is about brooms, be it broom-racing...or broom creation."

"I thought not. The Champion of...Champion Malatesti has shouted countless times it will be about Runes."

"He may be wrong."

"He may. But even if he is, the Coliseum is not large enough to organise a broom race inside it."

The Durmstrang boy had a point. The arena was incredibly large, but with the kind of speed brooms like the Nimbus 2000 had, it was far too small. Many Champions would crash into the wards protecting the spectators within a few seconds. Alexandra would survive it, of course, but many wizards and witches didn't have her regeneration powers.

Hermione was about to turn around and resume her quest of a book among the famous – or infamous, it was all a question of perspective – Pharaohs when an idea formed in her head.

It was a very hypothetical scenario...they hadn't deciphered the Clue at all...but still, they had the papyrus and had solved one enigma...

"Should someone else have information about the Second Task-"

"Yes, I would negotiate with her." The Bulgarian Quidditch Player gave her a smile at her gobsmacked impression. "I have not won my place on the national team of my country by ignoring opportunities..."

**19 November 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The meeting with Professor Babbling could have gone better.

Oh, her Runes Professor had nothing wrong to say about her eagerness to learn Runic languages. In fact, the old witch was very pleased to know she had mastered additional Galdr in Futhark, Hieroglyph, and Ogham. Her slow progress on the Lokk – which were the equivalent of spell creation in Runic magic – was judged to be predictable: writing and casting your own spells was a sign you were a master of Runes. It was extremely advanced, extremely profitable either on the battlefield or in academics...and took half a lifetime of dedication to achieve.

No, everything was fine on the academic front. It was the 'Tournament Clue' which was the problem.

Professor Babbling had confirmed the three of the Pharaoh names supposed to be in the cartouches were exactly what Hermione, Morag, and she had deduced from the riddles: a 'warrior', a 'great sorcerer', and an 'architect'.

Given how many Pharaohs there had been over the millennia, and how many had been fighting wars, conducting grand rituals, and building gigantic monuments, the number of names was properly astronomical.

And no, the warrior wasn't Ramses II, and the architect wasn't Khufu. She had expended one attempt discovering it the hard way.

It was good Hermione was so good at compiling important information from multiple books, otherwise she would have likely stopped trying to solve the enigma. As a Champion, the Basilisk-Slayer had to prepare herself physically, mentally, and magically for the Second Task. And of course there was-

"Alexandra! Alexandra!" The Potter Heiress turned back and raised an eyebrow at the identity of the witch running behind her.

"Hello, Ginny." Her steps only stopped near a corridor where there were no paintings or anything able to eavesdrop on a conversation, by a strange coincidence. "I was sorry to hear your parents didn't authorise you to be a spectator for the First Task."

Like always, there had been a change of rules from Dumbledore and McGonagall. The first and second-year students had been all barred from watching her throw a Leviathan and other spectacular – and bloody – displays. The third-year boys and girls had to ask their parents or their magical guardians for a signed permission. Lyre had been able to get one, House Malfoy being not hypocritical to deny her the chance to attend what had to be the European Tournament of a lifetime. The Weasley family hadn't given their 'daughter' one, which was almost hilarious given how half of their children had narrowly escaped death during the Chamber of Secrets' 'incident' in the very heart of Hogwarts.

"Yes," the younger witch was not terribly happy to be reminded of it, "fortunately, Lyre found a loophole. And you don't seem surprised."

"Ginny, the European Tournament rules are in great part based on those of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Not because the diplomatic teams of each school lacked imagination, but because the thousands-of-pages-long bloody thing is an international diplomatic treaty in its own right. And like every political agreement, it is designed to be filled with loopholes. That's the compromises they had to work out otherwise all the Champions would find ways to slaughter each other before we entered the arena for the First Task."

"Oh..." the girl who was Lady Yaxley in all but name was visibly taken aback, but she recovered quickly. "That makes sense. Anyway, there's a rule that says the permission can be granted by someone besides my parents or my magical guardians: the Champion of the school. Or the Champions of the school, now that the current Tournament has several."

"And so you came to me," Alexandra chuckled.

"Well, I wasn't going to ask Montague by owl-mail," the Gryffindor-sorted girl replied tartly.

Alexandra coughed. Graham Montague, aka the new Slytherin Champion, was a rabid Gryffindor-hater, and 'officially', 'Ginny Weasley' was a proper, rule-abiding Lioness.

"Yes, I think it would be a bit...awkward. He might be tempted to see it as an insult and give a reply in the form of a Howler. Right, give me the paper, I will sign it."

Because she had no doubt the younger witch had it in her pockets, and one second later, the Potter Heiress was proven right.

Alexandra spent a few seconds reading the thing, but it was obviously something akin to the Hogsmeade authorisation, although with the mention that the poor impressionable students may see brutal fighting, deaths, and all sorts of awful things.

Seriously, the hypocrisy was thick here. There were never any deaths or violent incidents inside the walls of Hogwarts. Obviously. Trust us. Hail Dumbledore!

"Done," Alexandra gave her the short piece of parchment. "Was there anything else?"

"Err...yes. Yes, there is. I want to...help you. I want to support you during the days between the Tasks."

"You want to endure the arduous and ungrateful Task of reading an entire section of Egyptian books?"

"I am serious...Alexandra."

The expression of...no, she wasn't going to deal with that.

"Ginny, I am not joking. Not where the Second Task and its Tournament Clue are concerned, anyway. Hermione and I really are reading a lot of books on Egyptian history and Runes in general. And you must have just begun Futhark yourself this year, no?"

"Yes. I was able to complete my fifth evocation yesterday."

"Really?" Alexandra blinked. The green-eyed Champion had no doubt Scylla Yaxley was talented magically, but the class of Professor Babbling wasn't exactly 'typical wand-wielding magic'. "That's very good for your level, half of our class managed a flawless evocation in December last year."

And at least a third of the students applying for Ancient Runes weren't able to evocate five glyphs at the end of the year.

"But for the moment, the best you can do is to continue to be successful academically," Alexandra said before sighing at the disappointed look. "I am not trying to be cruel, here...Scylla. It's just that so far, the Tasks are really tailored for the individual, and the research is time-consuming. Plus, of course, you have to stay at Hogwarts, which has a...sub-standard library in many aspects. If there was something like a teamwork Task, it would be different...but for now, it isn't."

"It's just..."

"I know. It's frustrating. But please enjoy the calm while you can. You are even younger than me, and...I think there are going to be very important events before this year is over. War is coming, I feel it, and so do other Champions. Enjoy the peace and work with Lyre on the subjects we discussed earlier."

The Styx Vipers may be just the vanguard of the new troubles coming this way. And if that was the case...well, the Chamber of Secrets had proved war could invite itself inside Hogwarts without warning.

**20 November 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It was good to be back at Hogwarts.

Nearly one month of Venetian dinners in the middle of priceless paintings the local school had manipulated thousands of artists to sell them for a pittance aside, being in presence of countless politicians at every hour of the day was giving him headaches.

It was something that his enemies had been undoubtedly planning for long before this Tournament was opened.

Alas, it was happening, and there was no move he could take to stop the eternal bickering.

It went without saying that when you gathered hundreds of important men and women in a single location, they achieved exactly nothing of significance, unless you counted emptying the high-quality food supplies of every village within a ten miles radius.

Thus coming back to Hogwarts and his office was a relief. It didn't matter that the wind was so violent it nearly deserved the term of storm, and that the rain was likely a few hours away given how dark the clouds were.

For the first time in days, he wasn't forced to chat with people he didn't like about subjects he didn't think important – and which weren't.

And just as he thought this, the gargoyle's ward announced the arrival of a visitor. Who...ah, Severus.

"Headmaster."

"Severus."

His Potions Master would never be described as a charismatic and friendly person, but today it seemed he was making a personal effort to radiate discontent and anger.

And Albus had a good idea why the younger wizard was so angry.

"When were you going to tell me she's still alive?"

That was a good question, truly. But first-

"Technically, Lily is not alive. Unless you support the idea that vampires are the continuation of the persons they were until they were transformed into undead monsters by some of the foulest sorceries imaginable. And I am not."

"This is not the question, Dumbledore!"

The Defeater of Grindelwald thought idly it was going to take a while to convince the Head of House Slytherin to call him 'Albus' again.

"I think it is, actually. I am far from an expert in vampires, but even I know that the longer it takes to change a vampire from the human it once was, the more inhuman they are when the transformation is over. The first unclear signs your friend was alive – though I did not recognise them as such – date from last year. It is far too long for her to have kept any fragment of her humanity."

"And yet she was there, in front of thousands of spectators, rewarding her daughter."

"The order of her Dark masters and mistresses, not any sign of true familial ties." Albus had thought the same thing for brief moments as he was shocked by the outcome of the First Task, but all these creatures cared about was their blood legacy, be it the one they drank or the one they 'cultivated'. "The girl you befriended and swore to protect is gone, Severus. I am sorry."

A snort was the answer he received for his explanation.

"If you don't think it is the case, how do you explain the fact she never tried to contact you once she walked this world as an undead?" Albus managed an almost conversational tone. "Since she was able to participate in the ceremony without going on a feeding rampage, it is evident she has good control over her blood thirst and the compulsions driving her undead impulses."

"Why should she?" Severus asked rhetorically in a voice which was drowning in self-inflicted venom. "We hardly went our own ways on good terms, and I can't exactly say I protected her daughter, can I?"

"More proof she isn't the woman she once was."

"Headmaster. Lily could hold a grudge for years and it wouldn't be allowed to die unless she ordered it. If you think she would have forgiven me in a snap if she had survived Godric's Hollow and went on to divorce her husband, I have a nice manor at the bottom of the Black Lake to sell you."

The former Chief Warlock wanted to say the younger man exaggerated. Unfortunately, as much as it pained him to admit it, he didn't know the Gryffindor red-haired teenager very well. As a model Prefect and an over-achieving student, there had been little reason for her to visit his office, and most of his knowledge came from Minerva, Filius, and of course Horace's praises.

"I will bow to your better knowledge, not that I think it will really be useful."

"No," the black-clothed wizard agreed quickly, something which gave him a bad feeling. "It's her daughter you have now to be wary about."

"I don't think I have to be concerned about a fourteen-year-old girl claiming the Headmaster seat, Severus."

"Claiming your seat, no. But she has more or less eradicated the Death Eaters' movement inside House Slytherin by her exploits. The younger students may have not been allowed to go to Venetia, but the older years sold them memories and enchanted images of the best moments. And since the First Task, they're almost worshipping her. The first time she came back, there was a long queue to get her autograph."

"Excuse me? One of the Champions is travelling by International Portkey between Venetia and Hogwarts, and you didn't think to inform me parchments of that nature were filed?"

"Well...as far as I know, she's Apparating, not using International Portkeys. So there's no paperwork."

The former Supreme Mugwump had a murderous urge to strangle the Slytherin alumni in front of him.

"And what is she doing that requires her presence so many times when the Tournament should demand all her attention?"

"Why drinking tea with her Head of House, of course."

Albus did not need any Legilimency to know Severus was lying, as the Head of Slytherin didn't bother hiding an expression of sinister amusement and the answer would not have fooled a first-year Hufflepuff.

"You are not helping, my boy."

"I know. This is what happens when you give civil disobedience a chance."

**26 November 1994, Alexandra's villa, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

There had been no obvious names or educated guesses to find this time.

To find the Pharaohs the Judges had chosen had required nearly all of the seven attempts for each of the cartouches – only in one case it had been found at the sixth – and without Hermione's prodigious skills at making comparisons to solve vague riddles and compare the sovereigns of Keter's exploits, it likely would have been a doomed effort.

The first cartouche had been for Pharaoh Narmer. He was a ruler of the First Dynasty, or it would be more accurate to say he was *the* ruler. For all the incompleteness of the Scuola Regina's archives – after thousands of years having completely accurate information was a vain hope – it was clear the man had been the Unifier of the two parts of Egypt. Well, the first Unifier after the Avatars of the Light and the Dark created some kind of grand cataclysm.

Interestingly, he wasn't a wizard at all, though he had assembled a group of powerful magical practitioners, both male and female, to fulfil his military ambitions.

The second cartouche had been for Pharaoh Khasekhemwy, of the Second Dynasty. He was an architect, renowned as the Lord of Fortresses and Graves. For hundreds of years, his creations had been renowned for their magical traps. The Statute had removed what was left of his historical mark, but the dangerousness of the defences he imagined was almost legendary by modern standards, which was impressive given the limited knowledge and resources of Antiquity at his disposal.

And the third...the third was for Intef the Elder, of the Eleventh Dynasty. Many thought this Pharaoh was a male, but the magical evidence was overwhelming 'Intef' had been female and had just taken this regal name in order to push forwards her claims to the throne of Keter.

The sorceress of the Eleventh Dynasty had won the civil war, and all the other conflicts she had fought during her time. The wizards and witches who lived during that time were so terrified of her that they dubbed her the 'Elder' when behind their doors they shivered.

Intef had left a mark upon Egypt to be sure. Reading between the lines, in a few years, she had used her Necromancy to muster an army of two or three thousand skeletons and keeping it at that level of strength until her death.

Surprisingly, joining this army seemed to be reserved to the best warriors. The traitors and those who importuned Intef were thrown to the crocodiles.

Alexandra could say it wasn't the reason she had just written the name in the cartouche, but she would be lying.

The magic flashed and rippled on the papyrus.

Alexandra prayed to the Morrigan it wasn't another enigma. Please let it not be another enigma. With the number of days left, there simply wasn't any time for an enigma...

But when the magic faded, the Ravenclaw Champion could breathe in relief. The new text summoned by magic was clearly written in French, not in Hieroglyphs.

"Come on Alex, what is it about?"

"You're too curious for your own good, Morag," the green-eyed Champion said absently before wincing. "We are invited to participate in a Runic Duellist Tournament."

**Author's note**: There will be one more chapter before the Second Task. At least that is the plan. They tend to change so fast...but I think I won't alter the chapter schedule this time.

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