**Chapter 116**

**Consequences**

**11 March 1995, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

Anyone sane and logical would have been tempted to say at first that yes, the Broom Race was the most difficult and painful part of a Champion's duties for the day.

That is, they would proclaim that as long as they weren't encircled by politicians and Very Important People all wanting to shake your hand and exchange some platitudes.

It was bloody exhausting, even if you were a magical Animagus.

It also was completely and utterly boring.

You might think there would be originality and all, but you would be wrong.

Whether it was in English, French, Italian, or another language translated into something she could understand, the same questions were asked, with the same expressions and the same fake compliments.

By this point, Alexandra was near-ready to jump on her brand-new Firebolt and fly to do a second 'lap' of the Broom Race.

Seriously, she had thought some post-Task events were bad, but now with the Statute broken, it was a new level of boredom and political shenanigans.

Plus there were the journalists. You couldn't miss them, be they magical or non-magical. And if you thought non-magical cameras were going to break in the highly-magical environment of the Scuola Regina, you were going to be disappointed.

Some 'magitek' company had already began to sell 'filters' and 'adapters' so that non-magical devices could function in the gardens and the castle. They weren't able to create the kind of magical photos that one could see in every publication of something like the *Loud Duck* or the *Daily Prophet,* but the non-magical objects weren't smoking or coming apart after four flashes.

Alas.

"Is it almost over?" she whispered to Lady Stella Zabini, as Fingolfin attacked a large well-cooked steak on the table nearby.

"'Almost' is the key word," the Black Widow smiled. "There is one more photo session with the Minister of Sports of the Italian government. Plus a few one-on-one interviews with some of the specialised Quidditch press."

Alexandra breathed out.

"I will be really happy when this Task day is finally over," the Lady Protector admitted, trying to keep a frown off her face. "Fortunately, there aren't that many of them left until the Tournament ends."

"Two," Blaise's mother smiled in a way that was not too reassuring.

Alexandra really had to use all her self-control to avoid sighing or groaning in despair.

"Is this confirmed officially?"

"It is not, but it might as well be," the Lamia replied honestly. "I expect the Judges will say the same thing within the next ten days."

"I am...not really surprised."

"You shouldn't be. This Fifth Task, in many ways, was a test. The test was successful."

Yeah, a test to check the top Champions could prove this 'post-Statute Task' would not end in a bloodbath, unlike the four previous ones.

Alexandra was realistic enough to see that if Frode Falk had still been among the participants, it wouldn't have worked. The same would have applied in the case a certain Light organisation had been fuelling the hatred in the shadows.

As it was, things had been...tense with Delacour, but manageable.

"One Task in April or May, and one Task right before the Summer Solstice?"

"The Judges will likely give you all the information you need soon."

The Ravenclaw Champion had the unpleasant feeling that this could be translated as a 'no'.

"Fine, Lady Zabini, keep your secrets." The Champion of Death slowly shook her head. "As long as we don't have to jump on a broom again, competing in two Tasks will be fine."

"You finished with the highest number of points," Stella Zabini reminded her, and Alexandra really, really wanted to roll her eyes.

"I won't deny it, but I won't forget that my ideas got me an enormous head-start over Krum. Unless I was able to do it every time there is some broom-racing involved, I believe Krum will beat me ten times out of ten."

Could Krum be beaten? To this, Alexandra was willing to give a tentative 'yes'. No one was invincible. But the most serious opposition would likely come from professional Quidditch players and other broom-riding experts. They were Krum's 'peers', assuming Hermione's boyfriend had any.

Much as she wanted to boast a rematch would not end the same way, Alexandra was not going to lie to herself. Her sub-par broom had been explosively changed into a storm of lightning and it had been propelled as fast as she magically could until her phenomenal crash. It had not been enough to beat Krum.

The Ravenclaw witch had to be realistic. The Hydra Animagus didn't train hard enough on a broom to match Krum, and to be fair, she didn't really have the motivation for it.

Flying with Fingolfin had been nice for one hour or two every day, but it wasn't something she wanted to spend her life on.

Was being a Hydra changing her perspective on the subject? Alexandra didn't think so.

No matter how far back she looked, the Morrigan's Chosen didn't remember having ever thought she would play Quidditch as a professional or compete in elite broom races across the continent.

"Knowing your limits is important, Alexandra." Stella Zabini approved. "In fact-"

"Mom! I'm not hungry anymore! Can we go home?"

Yes, it came from Fingolfin.

Yes, he had finished devouring most of his meat.

And yes, most of the journalists present had been close enough to hear his 'not-whining'.

Great.

"I think, my lovely dragon, that you have unfortunately volunteered for another photo marathon..."

The Britannian Gold was young, and assuredly didn't have her self-control. He groaned in despair...and it was completely justified.

**12 March 1995, Alexandra's Villa, Lands of the Scuola Regina**

There was something incredibly hilarious about seeing Alexandra place a large pillow under her dragon's head and then throw a large and comfy blanket over the golden scales.

Morag didn't snicker here and now, of course.

The young dragon was sleeping, at last.

So she waited until they were out of the bedroom and the lights were out to begin to chuckle.

"It isn't that funny, Morag."

"I completely disagree, mother hen."

Her friend's tongue clicked threateningly.

"You're lucky you weren't anywhere near him when Fingolfin slipped out of his role. Otherwise I would have believed it was your fault."

"Oh come on, Alex. Would I really do that?"

"Yes," her friend didn't miss a beat. "You absolutely would. Do you want some hot chocolate?"

"Sure," Morag *definitely* giggled as Alexandra yawned.

Five minutes later, they were drinking the delicious beverage on the sinfully comfortable couch of the villa's living room.

Everything was silent, and it was very enjoyable after the long hours where they were pressed from all sides by journalists and politicians.

When the silence was broken, it was by an unexpected source: Alexandra's owl returned from her nightly hunt. Despite one of the many owl perches being prepared for exactly that, the white bird went straight for the shoulder of her mistress.

"You're always having some sort of aerial predator on your shoulders, these last years," the red-haired Pureblood noted sarcastically.

The snowy owl, predictably, hooted angrily. She was visibly offended these shoulders were not her private territory, clearly.

"Well, with Fingolfin today," Alex petted the white feathers with a fond expression, "it was certainly the last time. He's getting way too big for that. I already had difficulty transporting him with all my strength. Next time, it will be Levitation Charms along some Runic Galdr."

"Or a goods lift," Morag suggested with a large smile.

"Or a goods lift," Alexandra took a long sip of hot chocolate. Her small sound of satisfaction came soon after. "I will bring him back to Zabini Manor tomorrow before breakfast. Fingolfin doesn't like Portkey or Apparition very much."

"Somehow, I am not surprised." A certain snowy owl jumped on the legs of her mistress, evidently having decided that the place was ideal to increase the petting and other treats which would unavoidably come her way. "This day is going to have consequences, you know."

"Everything has consequences, Morag," the green eyes rolled in what could be best described as slight amusement. "I think it is one of the first lessons I fully learned from Professor Flitwick, though I had the incomplete basics long before passing the Gates of Hogwarts. Causes, consequences. You do something to the world; the world is going to push back."

"That's not an incorrect vision of what happened today."

Alexandra groaned. Her hands didn't stop petting her snowy owl, however.

"Yes, there will be consequences. And I know you're not referring to Lyudmila Romanov having stolen the symbol of Thor."

"Stolen?" Morag raised an eyebrow.

Alexandra sniffed disdainfully.

"You think she took the time to fill the paperwork and wasted her time acquiring it legally?"

Morag giggled again.

"Point," the Irish Heiress replied. "On the other hand, she must have chosen to show it to the Judges beforehand. Otherwise she would have been disqualified." She blinked. "I presume you did the same for your dragon and everything you used during the Fifth Task."

"I presented Fingolfin and the rest at dawn, yes." And as evidence she had been awake for far too long, the Hydra Animagus yawned. "I didn't want to take the risk of getting zero points for the effort."

"Well, it worked."

"More or less," the Champion of House Ravenclaw agreed before shaking her head. "I still can't believe I missed a Gate during the Glacier Stage."

"In all fairness, it was the very one you could miss without too many problems, since it was under the snow and didn't lead to another stage."

"True."

"And in the end, it was to your advantage. No one found that Gate."

It had taken some hours for the Champions to arrive at the logical conclusion, but ultimately, they all had. All of them, including Alexandra, had only the opportunity to earn ninety points maximum.

"I presume that if Lyudmila hadn't used Mjölnir like she did, someone would have eventually found it." Alexandra said reasonably. "Whether I would have gone after it for the points...it would have certainly demanded a large detour."

"Your strategy was to go first and win a lot of points."

"Don't remind me."

Atalanta hooted loudly. As the petting was adequate, it meant a 'request' for owl treats, which were handed out of course.

"Thank goodness Crookshanks isn't here, otherwise your reign would come to a brutal end, oh Lady Protector."

"I know," Alexandra voiced dramatically. "It is in reality a secret Cabal of Owls and Cats that is ruling Magical Britain from the shadows. What do you say?"

"Are they less corrupt than Fudge?" the red-haired witch asked with curiosity.

"Undoubtedly," Alexandra nodded.

"All Hail Shadow-Mistress-Minister Atalanta then," the snowy owl, fortunately, was too busy eating her treats to preen like a Queen. "But these weren't the consequences I was referring to."

"I know." It said something about Alexandra's levels of tiredness that she didn't muster any enthusiasm or other significant emotion about the prospect. "I knew there were going to be consequences."

"Really?"

Alex huffed.

"Give me a little credit, Morag."

"You brought a talking dragon out in front of tens of thousands of spectators, Alex."

"Sure I did. And since you are like me of the House of Wisdom, answer me honestly. When do you think there would have been a better time to present Fingolfin?"

Morag opened her mouth for several seconds, and didn't find a proper answer. In the end, she did find it necessary to finish her hot chocolate instead of doing a passable imitation of a gaping fish.

Yes, Alex had made an excellent point. Fingolfin would have to be presented to the public eventually. With the Statute dead, the ability to hide a dragon that would eventually grow to the size of a house was slim to non-existent. And then there would have been a political storm in response, with several politicians no doubt vociferating this was the prelude to an Age of Tyranny.

With Fingolfin presented like he was, the argument lost all its strength before it could gain any momentum. Oh sure, there would be some idiots to scream accusations, but you didn't present a dragon in an international competition if you intended it to be your secret weapon.

Of course, Alexandra didn't really need a secret weapon to eliminate her opposition. Obviously. But some wizards and witches were really stupid.

"You are still going to have a lot of fun dealing with the Wizengamot."

"Yes, I will." The snowy owl was temporarily placed back on her shoulder. "I expect some letters for an emergency session will arrive in a few hours."

"You don't sound really worried."

"The background is prepared. And most of the important people we need to keep things stable were informed ahead of schedule."

"Because of *consequences*?"

Alexandra smiled. It didn't reach her green eyes.

"I raised a dragon, Morag. But there are others giant lizards who are perfectly capable of speaking their mind."

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh'," the smile turned into a grimace. "The end of the Statute forces my hand. But given the context, I think it would be completely fair to say my approach is about *mitigating the consequences*."

**14 March 1995, the Art Wing, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

As her 'ink mentor' had warned her, creating the ink they used on the maps was as much of an art as creating the maps themselves.

Patience, as always, was key. And not just because the octopi that exchanged their ink for food were throwing you into their lake if you showed any sign of impatience.

And no, Alexandra was not going to reveal how she knew *that*.

Some might have thought it was the end of the problem.

In fact, it was just the beginning of the journey.

The ink, as it was, was pure and magical, but hardly suited for the needs of the Scuola Regina artists.

It had to be laced with magic three times. It had to be mixed with Potion reagents. It had to be 'strengthened' by several Galdr whispered at precise hours of the day and night.

It was about the complete opposite of something called 'industry' and 'mass production'. Everything was done by the octopi or the witches here, and each barrel of ink which was collected was in several ways unique. The magic and the combinations of colours the ink absorbed before it was judged to be good to serve into the inkwells of the Scuola Regina made sure of that.

"Two drops more for the fluidity, I think," a voice whispered against her ears.

"Two? I don't sense it..."

"You have to extend your senses, Alexandra," Gina Sforza told her serenely in her singing Venetian dialect. "This isn't a vulgar ink you're creating here. Our ink is as much an Art as the paintings everyone admires at the Wing's entrance. And indeed, many times, we have painters who request our ink to provide extraordinary touches to their work."

"I am not surprised to hear it." Alexandra added the two drops, and it was like something had been sublimated in the cauldron where the ink was prepared. Before, the colour had been nearly dark purple, but now it was far closer to crimson, and there were shades of orange swirling lazily in several layers of the ink. "How many years ago did your predecessors begin their bargain with the octopi?"

"Oh, in the thirties," the distant cousin of the Champion of Desire smiled while checking her work.

"Sixty years ago?"

"No, when I said the thirties, I was speaking of the *sixteenth century's* thirties. True art can't be rushed, Alexandra."

That explained so many things, with the benefit of hindsight.

"Generations after generations perfecting the art until it is unique, Gina?"

"Precisely," the Succubus' expression was very smug, but then there was a lot to be proud of. "Of course, with each student who joins us, we try to improve our Art. You saw the Indian Octopi yesterday."

"The green ones keeping to themselves in the lake?"

"Those are the ones," Gina confirmed. "We bought them at a high price from Mysore, and we're very fortunate our lake is already modified to welcome tropical species under a special dome-monitored climate."

That was interesting, and not just because of who her sponsor of the ICW was.

"Ink quality or obtaining a new array of colours?"

"A bit of both, actually," Gina admitted. "It took me three interviews to convince the Headmistress, but I think the results will speak for themselves."

"You have interviews with the Headmistress for the Art projects?" It was very much unlike Hogwarts, but then Dumbledore had never been a great sponsor of the arts. Unless you counted 'badly singing an atrocious melody', that is.

"Of course! How else could we convince the Headmistress to allocate some funds for our artistic goals?"

Yeah, in many ways, the Scuola Regina and Hogwarts couldn't be more different. And no, there was no rancour there. Durmstrang wasn't exactly sponsoring Art projects either. Although the boys and girls considered it 'fun' to go fight XXXXX-class creatures in the ice wastes, so there was that.

"I'm going to finish this batch," Gina declared with a thin smile.

"I know I'm still lacking a bit in fluidity," Alexandra began, "but surely-"

"Oh, this has nothing to do with that," the Succubus coordinating the use of magical ink across several projects reassured her. "It's just that my cousin is here, and I think she wants to speak with you."

Alexandra turned her head, and sure enough, near the door, Lucrezia, Champion of Desire, was waiting. As hair adornment today, the blonde-haired Venetian witch had decided to include several enormous red feathers of exotic birds. And as usual, the Succubus managed to look perfect. Alexandra was sure that if plenty of other people tried, herself included, they would only manage to look utterly ridiculous.

"One day you will have to tell me how you manage to find where I am at every hour of the day," it was not spoken for the sake of idle conversation; these days her schedule was really, really busy and hardly 'orderly'.

Lucrezia Sforza simply smiled.

"I presume you didn't come here just to see how advanced my artistic plans are."

"No," the other Champion acknowledged. "I can tell you they are more advanced than the ones of your girlfriend, however. Painting isn't for her, unless one has a curious sense of what must stay on the canvas."

The Champion of Death winced. For the next few days, it was going to be judicious to avoid mentions of pencil and paint, in all likelihood.

"And?"

"And I think it's time we have a little reunion in my villa. I was thinking about one hour after dinner. That way we Champions will be able to discuss heart-to-heart without risk of being overheard by some inquisitive ears.

The Lady Protector of the Isles raised one curious eyebrow.

"When you say *Champions*-"

"Yes, I am not speaking of the Champions of the Tournament."

Yes, obviously, why would the High Priestess of Tlaloc want to invite Montague somewhere unless she wanted to sacrifice him on a black altar?

"I will be there," Alexandra promised.

**14 March 1995, Lucrezia's Villa, Lands of the Scuola Regina**

Lucrezia had always loved to present luxurious furniture and other items wherever she went, and her villa reflected this.

Though the Succubus had changed in several aspects, Eleonora knew, this one hadn't.

The Heiress of House Sforza had moved several carpets and sinfully comfortable armchairs, but where most witches would have stopped there, it was just the beginning for her. There were African and Mesoamerican masks on the walls, between old paintings representing the magic of other continents.

There were several artefacts spreading a light perfume of some flowery bouquet. There were crystal glasses for the after-dinner drinks – the wine and the other drinks were all Sforza-made, by the way.

Once she was properly guided into her grey seat, the Champion of Desire really opened the meeting.

"Good, everyone is here."

"You didn't invite Delacour," the Champion of Chaos couldn't resist interrupting Lucrezia, of course.

Naturally, their host chuckled.

"Must we play that game?" the High Priestess of Water purred. "If I invited the Phoenix, she and our dear Champion of Death here would spend two-thirds of their time murderously glaring at each other, and that's not even mentioning the barbs and the cursing attempts."

"I am not that bad," Alexandra Potter protested weakly.

Three pairs of eyes looked at her with some sense of exasperation.

"You're not," Eleonora admitted. "Except when Delacour is nearby." The Champion of Vesta turned back to Lucrezia. "I will admit, when I read some tales about Champions of Life and Death being unable to stand next each other without some spat spiralling out of control, I thought they were exaggerating. It seems they did not, however."

"Don't blame Life and Death," the Dark Queen bared her fangs. "Life and Death symbolic opposition has been broken, and my patron has whispered to me that Fire is not fuelling the inferno. No, I think our dear Lady Protector here and the Phoenix simply hated each other at first sight, and no Power will be able to change that."

"She tried to kill me the first time we met," the young green-eyed witch said with no trace of apology in her tone. "And I returned the favour."

Eleonora huffed loudly.

"You two certainly bring the worst of your personalities whenever you meet." She sipped some of her wine, and damn, it was really some divine nectar which had been selected for tonight. "I presume we aren't here to discuss why some Champions behave like cats and dogs the moment we place them in a room together."

"Or how one of our peers somehow manages to acquire more and more unique priceless artefacts of the Norse Pantheon," Alexandra added, smirking at Lyudmila. "Seriously, the existing worshippers of the Aesir are divided into exasperation, amusement, and sheer horror at the idea of a Champion of Loki wielding the sacred weapons of Odin and Thor!"

"I am trying my best," the Dark Queen said smugly.

"Yes," the Succubus commented, and it likely took her a great deal of strength to not roll her eyes. "I'm sure you are. Are you going to tell us how you accomplished this near-sacrilegious deed?"

"Sure," Lyudmila retorted. "As soon as you will tell me something of equal value. Now that you wield Water, there are a lot of things at your fingertips. Many Norse ships were sunk into the depths of the Norse Sea and the Baltic loaded with their loot, oh Desire."

"Don't count on it," whatever the hint was, the Succubus' confidence had disappeared in a second.

The blonde Durmstrang Champion shrugged.

"Then my secrets will remain my own...for now."

For several seconds, the four girls chose to not speak a word.

A silence which was broken by Alexandra.

"Fine. Now let's speak of the Seals. The Black Pyramid is gone, Lucrezia."

The smile the youngest Champion was given was both sincere and amused.

"Spreading your network of informants to the Egyptian dunes so soon?"

"Very funny," the green eyes of Death's Chosen were not amused. "If you have to know, some non-magical officers are really happy I removed several problems in significant numbers, including some mature Styx Vipers."

"Good to know," Eleonora said in precipitation. "But I wasn't under the impression the Seals could move!"

"Why not?" The Dark Queen didn't look surprised at all. "Once their initial purposes were fulfilled, each Seal became a gateway through which one of the Powers can act upon this world. It stands to reason that if they are not 'anchored' into this world, they will move from their original location."

By the way Alexandra Potter grimaced, it definitely wasn't a good thing.

"What can we expect? Because last time I checked, the Seal which activated in China was horrifying enough. The tsunami was bad, but it didn't transform all the water of a river into blood for twenty-four hours."

Eleonora scowled. That's why dealing with the Exchequer was better than dealing with the Army of Light, but hardly a pleasant obligation.

"Lucrezia..."

"I am not the architect of the Seals, *Eleonora,*" her once childhood friend reminded her. "And from what my superiors told me, plenty of things went awry."

The Dark Queen laughed, and by the sound of it, it was genuine.

"Good to know even the mighty Dark Lords of old can screw up," then her smile turned feral and dangerous. "I think I have a good idea of what is at stake, so let me sum-up what I think is true."

"By all means," Lucrezia replied curtly.

"Right now, we have two Seals truly 'anchored', and they are both in the Venetian Lagoon. Those are Water and Fire. By some strange coincidence, they also are the ones where the Champions were chosen and reborn. The Seal of Water became the Seal of Desire, and the big cat here is the result, given blessings by the Monolith of Ys. At the same time, the Seal of Life was solidly 'anchored' by a volcano, ending up as the Seal of Fire and a big fireworks volcanic display, I suppose. Which is why Alexandra here has to tolerate the arrogant flame bird."

"Yes?"

"Here is where it gets interesting, though," Lyudmila Romanov smiled wolfishly. "We are free to make our own destiny. We can refuse to enter the Seals and be reborn. How was it said in the old times? Ah, yes. Blah, blah, Ragnarok."

Lucrezia was clearly not amused by this repartee. For that matter, Alexandra looked incredibly wary.

"If you try to support this idea by deeds, we are going to have problems, Chaos."

The Champion of Loki deliberately ignored the Succubus and turned to meet the eyes of the British Champion.

"Come on, *Alexandra*. You didn't enter the Black Pyramid."

"That's because I didn't fancy becoming the Champion of Anubis, *Lyudmila*," the proud owner of a dragon replied tartly. "Assuming that's what would have happened to me once I entered this Seal, obviously."

"Obviously," the older blonde witch smiled. "I still think you would look extremely funny with a jackal head, for the record."

"Your joke is duly noted and classified as 'not funny'," the Champion standing at the top of the rankings shook her head in derision.

"I approve," Eleonora cleared her throat. "And for the sake of my curiosity, shouldn't there be four Seals properly anchored? Innocence and Chaos were the original Powers of the Light and the Darkness, respectively. Surely this means-"

The apologetic expression of Lucrezia Sforza said it all, and the Dark Queen's chuckles didn't improve the 'message'.

"We are all supposed to begin anew the Cycle of the Powers?"

"Well," the Chosen of Loki drawled, "there is already a magnificent shortage of Champions. You know, courtesy of Ra."

That the eyes of the Durmstrang Champion went to stare at Alexandra Potter immediately after was a coincidence, of course.

"I know what I did, and I don't regret it," the young girl told them. "And besides, while some of our peers lost their connections, they are still alive. Malatesti is in fine form, as we saw during the Fifth Task."

"I thought about inviting him, but he was visiting his parents tonight."

"This is reassuring," a certain Champion of Mischief spoke, "I almost thought you were going to inform us he had been invited by *Delacour's* parents."

Three Champions sighed very loudly.

"How many Seals are identified, by the way? Eleonora asked. "Like everyone else, I saw the two of Venice. What are the others?"

"The ones I saw with my own eyes were either some form of pyramid or temple which could be mistaken for one," Alexandra Potter replied immediately. "I told you about the Black Pyramid surrounded by skeletons and where the Lord of the Red Sands and Discord gave me a visit, right?"

"Right," the Champion of Innocence nodded.

"I think that means the Seal of Chaos will visit the desert somewhere in the short-term future," that was not good news at all. "Anyway. I'm pretty sure the Seal of War was on the Indian Ocean's floor, which is why we got a tsunami. Of course, it must have moved on by now. The Seal of Chaos was somewhere in the Arctic when it was triggered, correct?"

"Correct," Lyudmila answered. "It generated such a blizzard I was almost surprised to not see Frost Giants emerge from it. Oh well, I can give it time-"

Lucrezia glared, and the Dark Queen huffed.

"There was a Seal in China, as I said," Alexandra continued. "As I mentioned before, I don't know which Power it was supposed to bring back into the game, but it certainly caused plenty of chaos transforming water into blood. Are we sure the Exchequer didn't model some stuff after the Plagues of Egypt?"

"No," Lucrezia told her, and stopped at that, because youngest Lady Protector of Britain sounded mightily *annoyed* by the carnage unleashed.

"And I think there was one somewhere in Northern India, though I couldn't exactly pinpoint it."

"I'm pretty sure two of the others were in Siberia and Antarctica," the Dark Queen visibly decided to share vital information. "Don't forget, before this Tournament, the main goal was to build the Seals and make sure the Army of Light and its foolish Archmage didn't know what was coming. Immensities of wilderness with no human around suited their goals perfectly."

"And if any adventurers came around to check nothing bad was happening in the region, they disappeared without leaving a trace?"

Eleonora didn't know if the shrug which followed should be qualified as 'appalling' or 'horrifying'.

Sometimes, she really feared that Ra had, by his actions, created the very enemies which would destroy the world in their quest to oppose him.

But saying it here would not stop the disaster soon coming for them. Thus she preferred to ask the important question.

"How long do we have to make our choices?"

**15 March 1995, the Council Room of the Wizengamot, Ministry of Magic, London**

Have you ever felt like many people have already forged their opinion on a particular subject no matter what you tell them?

Alexandra was feeling it right now.

Obviously, it didn't apply to everyone.

Thank the Morrigan and every Power for that. Most of the coalition of the Grey and the Dark seemed largely amused, and as they had been warned beforehand, were mostly interested in the political opportunities which would be opened today.

Indeed, the Dark in general was the least problematic part of the assembly. They had always recognised the rights of other existing species to do their own business. In return, they were often the first to clamour for war when something went wrong, which was why there had been so many 'Goblin Rebellions' in the first place.

But yeah, Alexandra wasn't worried about hostile greetings from someone belonging to Lady Malfoy's or Lord Greengrass' supporters.

Okay, she wasn't exactly worried about the Light.

Worried implied they were in a position to do something bad.

"The emergency session of the fifteenth of March, year 1995, is now officially open," the Lady Protector said formally once the procedural call for the Lords and Ladies was officially over. Idly, she wondered who was going to be the spokesperson for Dumbledore and his factions.

After all, the silver-bearded Defeater of Grindelwald had known beforehand of talking and incredibly smart dragons. He was well aware there was one imprisoned under Hogwarts. And for all his hypocrisy, Alexandra didn't think he was sufficiently in denial to not recognise the problem posed by the Celestial Dragon Knight Summoner had 'loaned' to the Scuola Regina for the Third Task.

There were a few comments asking for precisions, and-

Ah, yes. Amos Diggory. How unsurprising.

"This emergency session will prove that an egregious number of laws have been broken!"

Oh, this was going to be good.

"I'm sorry, Lord Diggory," the Champion of the Morrigan asked politely. "But could I ask you whose laws you are referring to?"

If he was clever, the father of one Cedric Diggory was going to-

"Do not play with words, Lady Protector! Being in possession of a XXXXX-class creature possessing the ability to mimic human intelligence represents a crime by the Edicts formally adopted in 1694!"

"The same laws which are tied to the existence of the Statute of Secrecy?" Alexandra considered it a minor victory she managed not to burst into laughter.

Many Lords and Ladies didn't feel **it** necessary to adopt the same behaviour. A storm of chuckles and excited giggles spread in the Council Room.

A wise man would have taken it as a clue it was time to examine the law precedents before returning to the political struggle.

Amos Diggory did not behave like a wise man today.

"The 1697 law forbids any private citizen to own a dragon!"

"Then it is a good thing I don't own Fingolfin." Okay, this was a bit insulting. Lady Zabini and she had felt this particular issue coming the moment the adorable Britannian Gold hatched. "I raised him. I fed him."

No, Morag, she wasn't going to admit in front of the Wizengamot how many times she had given him the nursing bottle.

"Fingolfin is a dragon, and he is very smart. There is nothing to 'mimic'. I assure you dragons and other species are incredibly smart." The nonhuman part of the Wizengamot, obviously loved it. So did the Dark section. "Despite Ra's best efforts to convince the world of the contrary, dragons were once a noble and intelligent magical species."

"Oh please," Amos Diggory spat angrily. "Please stop trying to blame your Archmage nemesis for everything you don't like in our laws! Albus Dumbledore-"

"Albus Dumbledore *allied* with Ra," the Hydra Animagus hissed coldly. "And I will blame that Betrayer of Innocence for what he is guilty of, thank you very much. I know it is sometimes human nature to forgive and forget, but there are many wizards who are eager to forget before they have even considered the magnitude of his crimes."

"Dragons are incredibly dangerous and represent a national threat to Magical Britain! They are uncontrollable and beyond the ability of any wizard to control!"

Alexandra raised an eyebrow and stared at Amos Diggory like he was a first-class moron.

And arguably, that was a good description of the man right now. A bigoted, moralising, first-class moron.

She didn't bother wasting her saliva. Instead she gave the floor to Daphne's father.

"The Fifth Task of the European Magical Tournament," Lord Greengrass began coldly, "proved beyond truth a sound counter-argument to your words, Lord Diggory. While I think like many people that the flying abilities of this dragon could be a bit improved to avoid not throwing broom flyers into a river-"

There were plenty of cheers in the background.

"The Lady Protector was perfectly capable of controlling this young dragon. And I will dare say, compared to the actions of several other participants, the dragon named Fingolfin took far less risky gambits than other parties."

For the sake of her ego, Alexandra wasn't going to ask if it was a direct and not-subtle hint that her crash in the middle of the Coliseum had been Gryffindorish and incredibly dangerous.

"Still, the status of dragons mysteriously able to talk-"

Oh by all the swords of Camlann. Did they have to play this game at every step?

"There is no mystery, Lord Diggory. Dragons are a naturally intelligent species, and if magical preserves didn't try their best to turn them into stupid beasts the moment they came into the world, all the dragons we have in the preserves of the Isles would be as intelligent as you and I."

That, predictably, generated a considerable quantity of whispers and excited murmurs.

"As for the status, I agree there is a large loophole in the laws of this country. This is why I humbly request this Assembly a vote to grant full citizenship to all intelligent dragons. As Fingolfin and the members of the draconic species clearly gain maturity far faster than wizards and witches, my proposal is that they will be considered adults by their twelfth birthday."

"Citizenship?" Diggory didn't screech in horror, but Alexandra had no good idea how to describe it better than that.

Yeah, it was a nice idea to begin with Fingolfin. The Light bigots would have had heart attacks if the dragon of Knight Summoner came directly in front of them to request it, and let's not speak of a far bigger specimen...

"Yes, Citizenship." Alexandra spoke calmly. "The right to freedom of speech, the right to be taxed by the Ministry for all the judicious investments one makes," this one Grey and Dark Lords alike clapped enthusiastically, "and everything else the proud wizards and witches beyond the gates of this Council Room takes for granted. Yes, Lord MacDougal?"

"Do you intend to push for full representation as soon as possible, Lady Protector? Or will there be a slow adaptation and introducing dragons to the political realities of the Ministry of Magic?"

"I intend to do a mix of both, to be honest," the Ravenclaw Champion answered. "Assuming the proposals are accepted, there would be gradual implementation for dragons which are underage. Baby dragons are smart, but we aren't going to give them the right to vote instantly, much like we don't generally give the votes to eleven-year-old children entering Hogwarts. However, should adult talking dragons request citizenship, my opinion is that they should be given it immediately, with all the prerogatives and duties it implies."

"NO! By Merlin and Morgana, you can't do this! This is...this is UNNATURAL!"

All whispered conversations abruptly stopped.

Alexandra cleared her throat.

"Lord Diggory, you don't have the floor. Twenty Galleons of fine, and please wait for your turn-"

"I won't be silenced! Dragons in this very council is everything the Light fought against!"

Did the man realise that it was a strong incentive for all the wizards and witches of the Wizengamot who despised the Dark to vote against him?

From the frowns and grimaces in the ranks of certain supporters of Dumbledore, yes, many Light wizards were able to acknowledge it, even if Diggory didn't.

"You have not the floor. One week of suspension." Alexandra commented serenely. "As for the decision, it is a law proposal, and thus falls to this noble Assembly."

It took nonetheless three hours of debate before the first reading could be made, and the vote came just in time to return to the Scuola Regina for dinner.

It passed by an overwhelming majority, evidently.

**18 March 1995, Valley of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"You were right."

Since Cho thought of herself as a good girlfriend, she didn't tell Cedric 'I know' or 'you should have listened to me'.

The fifth-year Ravenclaw girl preferred safer and humbler words.

"About what?"

"My father," it felt like a great confession, and maybe it was one: Cho's father had died when she was young, so she had only faint memories of him.

"Ah. So you believe me now?"

"Yes. He's very...anti-creatures. And anti-dragons. Especially the ones who are talking in front of him. To the point it is getting ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, how?" Cho had heard from the lips of the Lady protector herself a sum-up of the most important Wizengamot session of the week, and it hadn't already been complimentary for Lord Diggory.

"He's pretending Potter is going to establish a dracocracy."

Cho burst into laughter.

"As in the form of government which reveres dragons, or the system where the ruler is a dragon?" the black-haired witch asked once she had hilarity under control.

"That's a good question," Cedric frowned. "I think he means both."

"Both," the Alchemist-specialised girl muttered and shook her head.

"And as if that isn't enough, he sent me a letter today saying that this dragon is only the first step on a reign of terror which will see dragons become the enforcers of the Dark Lady's tyrannical reign!"

Cho had heard quite some stupid things since this Tournament had officially begun. But this one was really over top, and they had some of the Light bigots and Warrington's stupid comments to be compared to.

"All right, it is stupid," she commented. "I really don't know how he arrived at this thing that doesn't deserve to be called 'reasoning', but I know I can find twelve or twenty flaws in a single minute. For example, I know Alexandra Potter doesn't need a pony-sized dragon to enforce anything. She can do it herself."

Honestly, Cho was all for the fact her enemies underestimated her, but after everything Alexandra had done with blade and wand in hand, it took a stupid brand of craziness to think the Lady Protector needed a dragon in the first place.

"I know." Cedric's expression was so filled with disappointment that Cho went to kiss him on the cheek to cheer him up. She didn't like to see her Badger so devoid of joy. "I'm beginning to wonder if he didn't let the stress of his duties destroy his judgement."

"He wouldn't be the first Ministry employee to do so."

"Yeah," Cedric grimaced. "I mean, I think there are dangerous threats out there, but I have a bit of a difficulty thinking a pony-sized dragon who decided to stop Sforza's broom by holding on to it for dear life is something scary enough to call the Aurors."

"And it didn't avoid the Bludgers conjured by the Durmstrang Champion that well."

"Yeah," Cedric repeated. "What Krum did in a few minutes, de-assembling a broom, switching some brakes, casting several broom-enhancing enchantments, yes, it scares me. The Dark Queen did summon so many pillows into existence that Montague missed the track and crashed. That's frightening. A dragon which happens to be talking? I don't want to lose a debate to one, but I have difficulties seeing where it is a problem, as long as it doesn't have rheumatics and goes on sneezing lightning bolts in an uncontrollable fashion."

"Maybe your mother will be able to convince him to rest," Cho said completely truthfully. "I know for sure there is a pause in the Wizengamot sessions next week, the time for Minister Bones to implement some of the new laws and finish some talks with the non-magical government of London."

"I don't know if he's going to rest, Cho. He didn't say it in his letters, but after the Task, he seriously hinted he was going to be present at certain meetings organised at Hogwarts."

As the school was closed for the foreseeable future, it didn't take an investigator to arrive at a conclusion.

"The Order of the Phoenix."

"And how do you know that?"

"Alexandra told me, of course."

Cedric gaped for a few seconds, before snorting.

"Of course, what did I expect?" The Hufflepuff Champion didn't slam his face against the greenness of the Scuola Regina's lawn, fortunately. "The 'freedom-loving organisation' is so discreet that the Lady Protector is informed of their moves."

"Now that's a bit of an exaggeration," Cho said with a smile, "but with Portkeys and the Floo Network denied to them, most members have to Apparate to the edge of the wards. Afterwards, it is just a matter of taking photos."

"I see." Cedric shook his head as if the world had stopped making sense. It was hard to blame him, given the stupidity reigning in certain circles. "It shouldn't have been a surprise, we already heard a dragon speaking in a previous Task, and that one was far bigger...anyway. How fare your Alchemy studies?"

"Very well, thank you. I now have plenty of contacts, and lessons on the subject every day. There's a lot of highly-complicated theory for now, but that was to be expected." The Ravenclaw witch hesitated, then decided to go ahead. "I hope to sit the theoretical exam at the beginning of June."

"The one which can open the way to the Apprenticeships?"

"That one, yes."

"Well, you know I support you one hundred per cent, Cho." Cedric then gave her an apologetic smile. "It isn't like I can do more; just re-reading the memos you gave me makes me feel inadequate."

"You're not inadequate. You are far more gifted than I in enough classes I need to use two hands to count them."

"That's really nice of you to say," at last, the kiss on her cheeks was returned. "But we all know I'm what plenty of Judges called a 'generalist wizard'. I don't have any great weakness, but I am not a master in any field either."

"As some Ravenclaws say, why do you wait to change this?"

Cedric chuckled.

"Well, there are the end-of-the-year exams, and I think my mother will kill me if I don't earn enough NEWTs..."

"Ouch," she lightly replied.

"I think I will have to choose how to correct or exploit that during the summer," her boyfriend shrugged. "In the meantime, could you arrange a meeting of all the Champions of our school?"

"I can," Cho blinked. Johnson wouldn't be a problem, and Montague knew which side of his bread was buttered. "But you may have to wait until next week. The Champion of my House isn't here this week-end. And I suppose you better tell her in advance what you want to do during this meeting."

"Apologise," Cedric admitted. "Apologise and make sure that for the Sixth Task, there is indeed a School strategy. I screwed up so hard during the Fifth Task, and in the end, I can't help but feel it was to the benefit of Krum and the other schools. We could have handled it far better than we did."

This was certainly a good point.

And Cho supposed, now that Professor Flitwick was the acting-Headmaster, it would be good to bring the Tournament Cup home. For the glory of Ravenclaw and all of that.

"Write your message," the Ravenclaw Seeker commanded, "and I will deliver it as soon as she comes back. Now go grab your broom. The weather is good, and I want to enjoy it in the air with you."

**18 March 1995**, **somewhere close to the Piazza Navona, Rome, Italy**

Yesterday, Astrid wondered why her cousin had chosen this particular address in Rome to speak with each other.

Now there was no more doubt: the drinks and the food were *divine*.

And it was just breakfast.

"Now I can't help but guess how good the other meals proposed at other hours of the day are," the Sverre Heiress teased.

"They make excellent tiramisu for dessert," Alexandra answered promptly, proving beyond doubt that it was not the first time she came here.

Astrid chuckled.

"I suppose you need the energy after all your swimming in the morning." As the temperatures grew more bearable, the Hogwarts Champion had been seen in the last week diving into the valley's river.

"I need to do some exercise, and doing my jogging at school is considerably more difficult than in the parks of London. The goat trails are *really* goat trails in Northern Venice."

"For sure, and you already do some flying with your dragon. Wasn't he supposed to return to England soon?"

Her young cousin groaned.

"He implored me with puppy eyes to stay," the green-eyed witch admitted. "And I lack the strength to deny him."

"I would have thought there would have been more problems, given how...err...destructive a dragon inside a villa can be."

"Fingolfin is very-well behaved. I give him plenty of books to read, and House Elves come to deliver his dinner when I'm not here to do so. The main problem comes when Atalanta is waking up. My owl was used to the idea the villa was her personal domain. The draconic intrusion was not liked at all. Fortunately, she is mostly nocturnal, and Fingolfin is diurnal. And I'm generally here when it's dawn or dusk."

"There is that for animal cooperation," the Durmstrang student agreed. "You don't think about acquiring more pets?"

Her cousin groaned for the second time during this conversation.

"Astrid, I already have a huge bat, a small parliament of snowy owls, a dragon, and of course a disobedient Ceryneian Hind. That's already a large investment when it comes to my companions. And most of them are so clever I don't think calling them 'pets' would do them justice."

"The big orange cat isn't yours? We often see it at breakfast."

"No, he's Hermione's. Crookshanks was a gift of mine, though."

The conversation shifted to other subjects, most of them light and related to the last weeks at school. Who was rumoured to have shared the bed of a Succubus – the bed or something similar, anyway. Some Heirs from different schools had been raised to the Lordship or the Ladyship as their parents decided strategically and present a new face to the world as the Age of the Statute was no more. One Beauxbatons substitute had been sent home for 'conduct unbecoming' though no one knew exactly what he had done. And of course, the greatest news of all: the Coliseum had closed its doors again.

"It is likely it won't open its gates to the public until the Sixth Task," Alexandra spoke with iron-clad certainty, and Astrid knew she was likely completely right. "Whenever that will be."

"There are plenty of rumours about that." The Sverre Heiress smiled. "Lyudmila told us to be very attentive to them. One never knows about what one can find in the glorious corridors of the Venetian school."

Alexandra returned the smile, and this was one of her genuinely cheerful ones.

"Come on, cousin. I realise our Judges are sadistic in the extreme, but so far, they've been disinclined to exploit *rumours*."

"You may be right. But as you said, they have proven to be disturbingly sadistic. Who are we to predict how deep their viciousness will sink?"

Her cousin raised her drink filled with orange juice to concede the point, and the rest of the breakfast finished in a pleasant mood.

"I heard you were studying the recent changes which have been impacted the Ley Lines."

"I am," it wasn't like it was a big secret after all; most of the Durmstrang students were informed of her research. "I was very interested in how the Seals impacted magic across the world. But as one can imagine, it's complicated."

"The Dark Queen didn't sponsor your project?"

"The Dark Queen is in exile now," that too was no secret; for all the conflict raging between magical and non-magical in the lands of the Romanov, the fact the Tsar had recalled his daughter was common knowledge. As was her refusal to obey his will, of course. "But even in the case she wasn't, it wouldn't have been good anyway. I need some Alchemical reagents whose methods of creation ended long ago. It isn't like phenomena like the one we're experiencing are very common."

"And where were the reagents created in the first place? Ancient Keter?"

"I wish," Astrid chuckled. "No, many tools and reagents were invented where according to legend, Alchemy was truly born. One land's travellers often called it the Land of the Rice Fields, but it was best known as the Celestial Empire of Tian Xia."

"Oh," judging by her expression, the young Lady Protector knew it was one of the many names which were given to the nation which was called China today. And yes, she was most likely aware there were almost no Chinese mages left in their homeland. "Yes, I could see how it would complicate things."

"You have a gift for understatement, cousin."

"One tries, when you are likely to be on the receiving end of a joke from Loki's Chosen!"

**25 March 1995, somewhere deep in the western hinterlands of China**

"Well," Alexandra breathed out, "that's a really depressing sight."

"My favourite answer is 'I told you so'," Cho Chang replied by her side.

Alexandra shrugged. The other Ravenclaw was definitely right about that in some way.

"Yes, you told me how unlikely it was we would find anything. You didn't warn me the landscape could likely lose a contest with Azkaban."

"Okay, now you're exaggerating, oh Lady Protector."

"Maybe a bit," the raven-haired witch conceded.

That said if there was any exaggeration, it wasn't a significant one.

The place the long-range Portkey had transported them to could be best described as: 'unwelcoming in the extreme'.

The trees were dark, small, and filled with thorns. The dark clouds over their heads made sure there was not an overabundance of natural light. Though there were stones indicating some people had lived here long ago, the ruins were so ruined - pardon the pun - the Ravenclaw Champion honestly couldn't say if they had belonged to a fortress or simple houses.

The old fortress in the North Sea must have beaten this kind of sight when it came to 'favourite Dark Lord's lair', but these ancient ruins had a sinister aura shrouding them. No non-magical or magical soul lived anywhere nearby, their spells had been quite clear about that.

"I suppose that since we came here, we better check," Cho declared, "but I am not hopeful. There isn't anything left standing."

"And yet, did you hear them?"

"Hear what?"

"All the animals and the birds which should make this place home," the Hydra Animagus looked around while speaking. "I made big efforts to mask my Animagus' essence, so it isn't my arrival which forced the local rabbits and other mammals to flee. But this place is silent. Too silent."

It wasn't completely dead, by all means. There were some signs of life, bird songs and other displays of life in the distance.

"It's possible that when this place fell, the destroyers cursed it and the effects have endured for centuries."

Alexandra shook her head.

"Nice try, Cho, but the stones look like they were abandoned for far longer than that."

The Champion of the Morrigan changed her eyes into those of a Hydra, and began to search.

It didn't take long to find it.

"Arcanem Revelio," she muttered, and the track between the twisted trunks suddenly shone with green lights.

She wasn't Sherlock Holmes.

But these were clearly the footprints of a human.

Wand out, now that she knew what she was looking for, Alexandra could see some had not even disappeared under the carpet of dead leaves. It had rained recently here, and the mud had stuck to someone's shoes.

"I was wrong and you were right," Cho admitted out loud. "Twenty-four hours, you think?"

"Maybe a bit longer," the Champion of Death replied.

"Do you think someone heard of our move and preceded us?"

"I seriously doubt it." Alexandra shook her head after a second of hesitation. "If someone did know we were coming, why this extraordinary lack of measures to erase the clues? I may have been arrogant in recent days, but I'm realistic. There are ways older mages can fully hide their presence from me. Here, it looks like whoever came here before us didn't even try to hide his or her presence."

"What is surprising is that the footsteps clearly ignore the ruins and go northwards," the raven-haired fifth-year girl bit her lip. "Do you think it could be a coincidence?"

Alexandra winced.

"I wasn't a great believer in coincidences *before* I learned how Fate had been enslaved to the Light."

"But Fate is free now, no?" Cho insisted. "It is not of the Light anymore, and doesn't have a Champion."

"That would not be an argument in favour of this being a coincidence..." No matter how much she tried to observe her surroundings, the same sinister atmosphere reigned. "Do you want to continue?"

"I thought you were the leader of this expedition."

Alexandra didn't manage to push any joy into the sound she made in return.

"That's true, I suppose. But I was more or less convinced there were no dangers here, and I am far more difficult to kill than you. Moreover, whoever came here is a serious magical powerhouse. Our spells wouldn't have so easily recorded the magical signatures otherwise."

"I want to continue," Cho answered after a few seconds. "Those were my ancestors' lands, and I don't like someone cursing them."

"As you wish."

The walk was quite gloomy.

The sight had been depressing before; now it almost urged you to cry.

The forest looked dead, and here and there carved stones emerged, last witnesses of what had been a magical settlement in the past.

The Dark Magic which struck her about ten minutes later managed to make matters *worse*.

"Alexandra?"

"Someone cast Dark Magic ahead," the Champion of the Morrigan 'tasted' the air with all her senses – there was no other word for it – and she didn't like it at all. "I think some kind of Necromancy ritual."

So much for the idea of a coincidence.

Necromancers were extremely rare on the Asian Continent, especially so far eastwards. What were the odds that she, the Champion of Death, would find the work of one on her first foray in China?

Alexandra already had her wand in hand, but now she drew a sword too. This was lightly enchanted steel, but it would have to do. And-

The forest disappeared. Instead there was smoke. And not a normal one.

"Ventus Maximus!"

The wizard or the witch who had preceded them had been neglectful in the extreme.

The basic Wind spell was enough to banish all the cursed smoke in mere seconds. Or maybe he or she had believed that the risk would be limited to non-magical people finding the site, and as such a basic Curse of Poisoned Smoke would be enough?

This deduction attempt fell to the wayside as Alexandra saw what was revealed.

"A graveyard," Cho muttered behind her.

"An Ossuary," Alexandra corrected. "Graveyard implies 'graves'. Here, it looks like they were focused on preserving the bones."

"In any case, this is an odious case of desecration!" Cho barked. Alexandra understood her anger.

Whoever had preceded them, he or she had not been concerned about preserving this historical site.

There was now a large crater carved into the earth to reveal the memorial-deposit of ancient bones.

Alexandra didn't honestly know if a Bombarda Maxima had done the job or not, but the result was about the same.

It had blasted a considerable quantity of bones everywhere, and the smell of ritual magic indicated some may very well have been used for worse things than mere disrespect to long-dead wizards.

"Yes, it is." Alexandra jumped into the hole, and what she felt confirmed her fears. "This Ossuary was protected, and the preservation spells still worked until a few days ago."

"Desecration," Cho repeated in a furious mood.

"Yes, but what for?"

To that, they both had no answer.

The tunnel was large and they had their foci to illuminate their way, so they progressed slowly.

On both sides there were thousands upon thousands of bones imbedded into the walls, and it was likely an underestimation: there were smaller tunnels opening to their right and left. And yes, most were humans.

They finally arrived into what had to be the heart of the Ossuary. It may be the wrong choice of words: this kind of place certainly had no heart. The Chinese wizards didn't believe in the same rituals as those practised in Egypt and by the Pharaohs of old. It had only a mountain of bones.

But Alexandra felt it was a place of power. Everything screamed 'important'. It had certainly been hidden by the nearby presence of several Ley Lines.

It was an underground chamber which could have served as a throne room such was its size.

It was bloodily enormous.

And save the skulls placed into the walls, it was completely, utterly empty.

Something had been done. And it had been a significant Necromancy ritual.

But the Morrigan provided no clue, and Alexandra had no idea how to find out the truth. This time, the spells utterly failed to give them clues. Yeah, the desecrator had covered its tracks at long last.

"Cho? I see scripts on the left..."

"Too faded to be of any use," the other Ravenclaw grimaced. "And it looks so ancient I am not sure I would be able to help you even if they had been perfectly preserved."

"Too bad," the Hydra Animagus was rarely defeatist, but the conclusion she arrived to was easy to make this time. "There were bones here, and there was a Necromancer, all right. And unfortunately, I can tell you that whatever he or she hoped to achieve, it certainly worked."

"I fear you are right, but why now?"

"I..." A conversation last week which had prompted this very expedition returned to the forefront of her thoughts. "The Seals' triggers altered the Ley Lines in several regions of the world, and this Ossuary was hidden by a Ley Line. If the magic flow was disturbed, that would have been sufficient for someone powerful looking for it."

"Yes," and Alexandra could feel the important question coming a couple of heartbeats before it was uttered? "But who would have the motivation to do something like that?"

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

Lilian wasn't easily surprised since her rebirth as a Vampiri Romani, but her daughter was definitely one of the souls who could provide astonishment after astonishment these days.

"A giant Ossuary in China? You really enjoy living through interesting adventures, Alexandra."

"Thank you, mother." The green eyes which were almost pa perfect copy of hers burned with the Power of Death. "And I note you didn't answer my question."

"Absolutely true," the red-haired Enchantress sipped her glass of blood before continuing. "I'm afraid I was aware of no such location. Of course, that doesn't mean anything. Chinese magics and artefact lore are not anything I ever studied. This is more Knight Summoner's area of expertise, I'm afraid."

Though she was under the impression Knight Mulan in general maintained only a light presence, and far closer to the coast...

"Regarding your Necromancer problem, this is very disturbing. Are you sure most of the bones were untouched?"

"As certain as I can be without counting one by one," Alexandra grunted. "We threw some Repairing Charms, and it confirmed the bones which were outside had been the ones which were blasted apart by the initial desecration of the Ossuary. And even if there had been some missing femurs or skulls, there were easily millions of them left under that hill. It's not like the mysterious invader was focused on the *quantity* of the bones."

"I agree." And if it wasn't quantity, it was quality. A Necromancer had raided something which had been left undisturbed for centuries, and this had happened mere days after the Breaking of the Statute. Her daughter was right, it couldn't be a coincidence.

"I would have contacted the Queen myself, but she told me she was busy with something problematic in the Middle East."

That was a way to describe it. The reality was that one magical enclave had been besieged by an enraged mob, and the wizards had unleashed some Djinns to teach their opponents a lesson. Predictably, it had all gone to hell from there.

"I see. Well, I will certainly speak with Headmistress Sforza about your discovery and how your quest for Alchemical reagents obtained such a surprising result. And I'm sure you have a question on your lips."

"Am I so predictable?"

"Perhaps not for everyone," she reassured her daughter.

"That's so good to hear." A faint smile appeared before disappearing extremely fast. "Is it possible this Necromancer is a member of the Exchequer?"

Lilian breathed out theatrically, since she had absolutely no reason for it.

"Before Venice, I would have said no."

The King would have either killed those who dared go against his orders, and if this expedition had the King's approval, it would not have behaved like the dirty work of a tomb-raider.

"That is not exactly what I wanted to hear, mother."

The young Vampiri Romani bared her fangs.

"One does not always receive good news." And then all sense of humour vanished. If her daughter was able to feel a terribly powerful ritual made by a Necromancer despite the fact it had been cast days ago, it wasn't likely going to be good for the Exchequer or for the world. "I am not going to pretend we don't have Necromancers. We have a Knight Necromancer among the Knights, after all."

But this kind of gratuitous desecration wouldn't amuse a lot of Knights. Lilian had met the Priest, and the man would have absolutely taught a dire lesson to anyone demolishing sanctuaries of the dead. As would likely Knight Herald and her own Mistress.

"I am going to inform the relevant parties to make sure this party is dealt with," the former Lady Potter swore to her daughter. "They are going to find this Necromancer and deal with the problem."

**27 March 1995, somewhere in the south of Germany**

Breaking the wards had not taken long.

The defences had been considerably stronger than many bases, but twenty of the wizards who had cast them were Necromancers in their own right, and now they were part of the attacking force. This by itself was a massive intelligence advantage.

But she had not been willing to take any risks.

And so the vanguard of the assault had been led by Knight Herald, and three other Knights had been acting in support.

Half of the wizards and witches had surrendered on the spot when they saw who was coming.

The other half had tried to fight.

Most of them had died achieving nothing.

And Morgane Rys'Ygraine of Avalon didn't find any reason to rejoice.

This was a base of the Exchequer they were attacking, and though many of the lower-ranked personnel had remained loyal, the number of disloyal was far worse than she had accounted for.

The Queen of the Exchequer strolled into the base, not bothering to draw her wand.

It wasn't like the resistance deserved that mark of respect.

Several laboratories and Potion brewing rooms were burning. Three-quarters of them were due to the fact her subordinates had killed the Necromancers hiding in them with fire, but some looked like desperate attempts to deny them first-class evidence.

It was only in the deepest room, three levels beneath the entrance, that the witch who had been the sworn enemy of the Knights of the Round Table found the man she was looking for.

Of course, as could be expected, Mulan had found him first, and had one of her daggers on his neck.

"I find myself disappointed, my Rook. Three centuries of service, and for what?"

"Your Majesty, I assure you-"

"Silence, traitor!" Maybe she should have chosen another Knight than Summoner for this purpose. On the other hand, the mistress of Summons would have not tolerated being kept aside for this very well...

"It was well-done, I will admit." Morgane spoke coldly. "You and your associates chose Ossuaries, Graveyards, and many other places of Death that were not monitored by our organisation. Indeed, some of them we weren't aware of in the first place. Unfortunately for you, the moment we became aware of it, this made the culpability of one of our own all the more evident. People who aren't aware of our organisation's reach and influence would not have been able to keep us blind for so long."

This was all the courtesy she was going to give him, however. Treason was treason, and there were only so many targets that could require an army worth of undead and other rare 'Necromancy resources'.

"Now I have a first question for you. Where is Knight Necromancer?"

The Rook, as she had expected, chose to remain completely silent.

Mulan reacted more forcefully, naturally, moving her dagger until it shed blood.

"Answer! Where is *Arianna Dumbledore*?"

"It doesn't matter," the Rook, impressively, managed to glare with some defiance lurking in his eyes. "Like her brother and his lover, she will be a thorn in your side for this century and the next! She has all the talent of the Headmaster of Hogwarts and his lover, and none of their weaknesses-"

"She is talented, yes. She will perish all the same." Morgane looked at the Rook with disappointment. "This is your last chance. What did she steal in the ruins of Tian Xia?"

"I don't know, and if I knew I wouldn't tell you!"

Any other day, the Queen would have been proud that such a young Knight had been able to instil devotion and loyalty in such a long-standing member of the Exchequer.

But this wasn't a normal day. Over a third of their Necromancers had turned traitor, and though more than two-thirds of them had been captured or killed, the head of this betrayal was nowhere to be found.

"The King is gone, and a new Age is beginning!"

Some said that Vampiri Romani couldn't feel human emotions.

Morgane Rys'Ygraine could vouch this was untrue; right now, she felt enough exasperation to boil an entire sea.

"Why does everyone think that current and former Champions of Death are unable to enforce the rule of the Dark?" she asked rhetorically with a touch of frustration in her voice. "Very well. Knight Summoner? He is yours. I want to know everything, from the moment they began to plot behind our backs to how they could collect things that we weren't aware of in the first place."

"I won't disappoint you, my Queen."

"You won't be successful-"

"They all say that," the ancient witch of the Celestial Gate smirked. "And in the end, I prove all your boasts wrong. Shall we begin?"

**Author's note**: The Fifth Task and the events of Venice had consequences, and a lot of them are not beneficial for the world and the magical community...

We're slowly approaching the endgame for Fourth Year. Two more Tasks, and the status quo of the last centuries quickly falls apart...

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