**Chapter 117**

**The Battle of Asgard**

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

Susan couldn't help but smirk when Alexandra finally emerged from the bedroom, yawning in a manner that would have been almost impossible if she wasn't an Animagus.

Then her lover yawned again. And again.

"Next time, you will join me earlier. And you should hurry a bit. If you don't, you are going to have to skip breakfast before the classes."

"I have a Changelina, remember?"

"Your Changelina allows you to dress in record time, but so far, it is not good enough to apply some cosmetics and convince anyone you didn't get out of bed a couple of minutes ago."

There was a loud groan, but her argument hit the mark, because Alexandra rushed to the bathroom.

Three minutes later, the Champion of House Ravenclaw was back, and looking almost presentable by her standards, with her school robes and some nice boots the Bones Heiress hadn't seen before.

"Better?" her girlfriend asked with a thin smile.

"Better," Susan approved. "I saw all the papers on your desk, you know."

"I was way too tired last night. I will tidy up after lunch."

"Oh?"

"The meeting takes place today in London. I scheduled it there, so I can speak the usual hour of politics with your aunt right after."

"I can't help but think," the red-haired Hufflepuff commented grinning, "that you put way more effort into this fantasy project than into British politics."

"Of course!" Alexandra was unrepentant, as could be expected. "There are too many politicians already to deal with the latter. Whereas if I don't deal with the former, who will replace me?"

"Maybe all the fans of your favourite books?" Susan tried, earning a 'Hydra-stare' for her audacity.

They grabbed their bags – enchanted to be lighter, otherwise the pile of books would hurt their shoulders – and left the Villa. The weather remained cold and wet, these days.

"The big Transfiguration lesson is this morning?" her girlfriend yawned again, proving that no, cold water and some minor things weren't enough to shrug off waking up too late.

"Yes. Professor Flitwick apparently met the Venetian teachers and there was an agreement to see how well all the Champions and substitutes adapted to this new curriculum this year."

"I have a feeling it's going to be hilarious."

Susan slightly inclined her head, and the silent question was answered immediately.

"Unlike at Hogwarts, our hosts did send us to classes which were meeting their standards. Sometimes it was with wizards and witches who were our ages, but it was a coincidence, not a goal."

"Yes, I know that." The niece of the new Minister of Magic raised an eyebrow. "So you don't think several of our peers have been able to catch up?"

"Susan, you were the one who told me a few days ago some wizards who shall remain anonymous were screwing up the precision of their Summoning Charm."

"Sure, but Accio is not Transfiguration. It's Charms."

The smile of Alexandra could be best described as 'carnivorous'.

"It's still going to be interesting."

"Oh, yes. Diggory and Johnson will be here, right?"

"That's what the 'every Hogwarts student must attend' order suggested, yes," she replied drily, receiving a chuckle for it. "What interests you in particular?"

"Conjuration," the Champion of Ravenclaw replied without hesitation. "For the moment, the number of spells of that category I'm capable of casting can be counted on one hand. And I have a lot of difficulties using the Vanishing Spell when the command comes to cast it nonverbally."

"Conjuration is sixth-year." Yes, her girlfriend was an overachiever. Not in the same way as Granger, praise the Powers for that, but sometimes she wanted to progress too fast for her own good. "And the Vanishing Spell is fifth-year, and you have already mastered it."

The Bones Heiress could cast the latter too, but she often needed two or three attempts to do it in an acceptable manner.

"I still prefer Charms. Transfiguration is very complicated, and the older we get, the worse it feels when you open a book of it. Sometimes I have a feeling certain treatises are written in a different language."

"Well, English is rarely found here..."

Alexandra tried to groan, but ended up hissing.

"You're not helping!"

"Absolutely not," the Bones Heiress said smugly before changing the subject. "Still no news about the Sixth Task?"

"Not a single clue. And I'm beginning to feel we are going to have to find out that information the hard way."

"Because the Judges are sadists?"

"Exactly!"

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

Neville glared at the guinea pig in front of him.

The guinea pig glared back.

Some of it, the Boy-Who-Lived admitted deep inside, might have to do with the fact the fur of the guinea pig was now a fluorescent purple instead of its original white-brown.

And it had snake fangs.

"I hate Switching Spells," the Gryffindor grumbled.

"At least they told you to practise that," Ron muttered on his left. "Me, I'm stuck on the Rat-to-Goblet Transfiguration. Vera Verto!"

There was a powerful flash of magic and-

Neville winced.

The black rat had been transformed...sort of.

There was a black goblet. It also happened to have a long tail.

"Lamentable," the youngest Weasley male commented upon his latest failure. "What am I doing wrong?"

"You're pouring too much magic into your spell, and you're not focusing enough on the final result," Blaise Zabini intervened in his usual bored tone.

"I wasn't asking *you*."

"Could have fooled me," the son of the Black Widow shrugged. "Oh, it looks like Diggory managed to conjure a complete chess game."

Neville abandoned his contest of glares with the guinea pig to watch the Hufflepuff, and indeed, Zabini was right. The Hufflepuff Champion was proudly presenting to Professor Flitwick and the Venetian witch who stood as their Transfiguration instructor for today, a large chessboard and dozens of chess pieces.

And this didn't come out as a cheap chess presentation: the black pieces had onyx gemstones, the white looked like they had been carved from ivory, and there were parts of the board which shone like they had been made of marble.

"What is Potter doing?" Ron asked, and there was only a certain dark-skinned Slytherin smirking.

"I thought you didn't want me to answer? Fine. Our most august Lady Protector is carving Runes into the chess pieces and the rest. That way the Conjuration will last for a few days, and Diggory will be able to present his work to other Transfiguration teachers."

"Why would she do that? She hates Diggory!"

Blaise Zabini rolled his eyes.

"No, Weasley, she doesn't hate Diggory." The son of the Black Widow murmured an incantation, and his guinea pig became a cactus, before the transformation was reversed after a few seconds. There were still a few thorns amidst the fur of the animal, though. "In fact, I don't think Potter *hates* a lot of people. There are people she dislikes, and many times, I've seen her ignore them."

"And Delacour?" Neville asked with a large dose of sarcasm in his voice.

"Oh, yeah, Potter hates Delacour. And the Veela fire-bitch returns the favour."

How good of Zabini to confirm where he stood in this quarrel.

"At least Fleur Delacour didn't twist the law to justify how she raised a dragon," Neville whispered.

"If she hadn't had a change of heart after getting roasted in the First Task, Delacour would have been by your side when your murderous friends tried to destroy Venice," Zabini retorted. "Excuse me if I don't pretend to like this Phoenix."

"You have nothing to say about the illegality of hatching dragon eggs and breaking the law?"

"In fact, I do." The Slytherin sneered. "I find it hilarious that you were caught red-handed in first year with a baby dragon."

Neville grimaced. That was a very low blow, even for a Slytherin.

"We were about to send it to a dragon preserve when she escaped us."

Yes, it seemed 'Norbert' had been 'Norberta'. Hagrid didn't know enough about dragons to make out the difference between males and females.

Ron's hands twitched, no doubt as he remembered the dangerous fangs of Norberta.

"And that way we learned that females were far more vicious than males," the red-haired Gryffindor sighed. "How do you make a dragon less dangerous, anyway?"

"Switch its fangs for rubber copies, and an elemental-freezing Charm of significant power?" Morag MacDougal arrived, making them all almost jump on their chairs. "Though I don't advise to try it until you have mastered the Switching Spell. Err...Longbottom, why does your guinea pig have fangs? You were supposed to switch the tails, not the fangs?"

"I formally refuse respectfully to answer that question," the former Champion of Gryffindor raised his nose and huffed.

"As well you should," the Ravenclaw girl chuckled. "Reverta Anima Arcanem." The spell struck with a tight blue beam, and the snake fangs of the guinea pig instantly vanished, along with the purple fur.

The animal in front of him was back to normal...but it tried nonetheless to bite his hands.

"You should practise more." It was really, really irritating when the scions of Rowena's House were all trying to emulate Hermione Granger. "This applies to you too, Blaise. I know you are talented when it comes to Transfiguration."

"You sound like my mother," the Slytherin complained.

Fortunately, the bells chose this moment to thunderously announce the end of the morning classes.

"Every student who hasn't been able to achieve the spell curriculum as detailed on his parchment will come back next week!" the foreign teacher commanded.

Neville glanced at the offending piece laying abandoned on his desk, and sadly, it refused to change. He still had fifteen spells to validate, and it included this never-damned-enough Switching Spell.

"I hate Transfiguration." And it really didn't help that Potter, MacDougal, and Bones, among many, had largely performed everything like it was bloody *easy*!

"I wish it was simpler," Ron told him while returning his books to his bag. "But there's good news."

"Good news?"

"Yeah, we aren't going to risk our lives in a Task where Transfiguration will be our death or our salvation."

"How would you organise a Transfiguration-only Task in the first place?"

"I don't know, but I didn't think it was possible to be imprisoned in the cells of the Doge Palace in the first place!"

That, honestly, was a very good point.

"Oh, and here comes the Dark Queen. Let's get away, and fast."

"She must be here to speak with Potter. Shall we-"

"No," Ron cut categorically, "I'm not going to try to spy upon those two monsters. I value my life, thanks."

**24 March 1995, somewhere not far from the Thames, London, England**

The view, so high in the building, was rather spectacular.

But Alexandra had not come for the view.

She had come to meet the man who was currently reading her notes.

"And here I thought I wanted to remain as close to the work of Tolkien as possible," the movie-maker said after a theatrical chuckle. "You're even more idealistic than I, Lady Potter."

The Champion of Death raised both eyebrows.

"Is it going to be a problem?"

"No," the far older man shook his head. "I am in fact impressed by your dedication. I just want you to realise that sometimes, what is written in a book is not the most ideal scenario for a movie."

She was sure her green eyes narrowed for a few seconds.

"This is a good point," she acknowledged. "But I still think some things have to be preserved at all costs. Maybe it is because I survived several magic battles or because of idealism, but I think some core aspects can't be forgotten."

"Such as?"

Well, since it was politely asked...

"Ultimately, the war strategy of Saruman was flat out doomed to failure from the very beginning." Alexandra began slowly. "Gandalf is right to call him a fool: he makes enemies on every side, and whoever wins in the end, Saruman loses. In mere days, he more or less shatters years of effort on the part of Grima Wormtongue. The difference couldn't be more massive with the Witch-King of Angmar, who clearly has a plan, despite being an eldritch horror tied to one of the Rings of Men."

She paused here to collect her thoughts.

"And yes, I think Gandalf the White must be there at the gates of Minas Tirith and stop him from entering the city. This is just the iconic moment of defiance before the grand Battle of the Pelennor Fields."

The film-maker passed a hand in his beard – which was rather hirsute but managed to remain charming – before nodding.

"I suppose I have no right to be surprised by that proclamation. And while I have not read that far, may I guess you are against the changes suggested for Denethor?"

"You guess correctly," Alexandra grimaced. "Don't get me wrong, I don't like the character per se. And it can be justly argued that during all the time he ruled Gondor, his strategy was way too defensive. But at the time the books really begin, the odds are extremely bad for Gondor. Sauron has mustered the entire East to destroy the West, and without the Rohirrim, Denethor simply doesn't have much in terms of offensive options. He does the best he can; it's just that the cupboard of reinforcements is empty. Well, at least until he snaps when his son is near-mortally wounded."

"He is still a very prideful man."

Alexandra laughed.

"I am not arguing with that. But the point I wanted to make is that while Denethor is as competent as Theoden if not more, he faces the competent Dark Lord, while the Rohirrim are facing first the traitor who has never tried to properly wage war. Saruman is not and will never be the true Lord of the Rings."

The hair was as hirsute as the beard, it must be said, and passing his hand into the former did not change that reality.

"More fantasy movies would certainly be in preparation if you were in charge of Hollywood," the older man nodded. "But naturally, you have your conditions, and I have mine."

Alexandra nodded. She had expected something like that from the very beginning.

"From what I was given to understand, support for the whole project is considerable. Finding the money is not going to be difficult."

"It's always good to hear, Lady Potter. But I was more referring to the conditions I intend for filming the works of Tolkien. I agree three movies will be entirely necessarily to give justice to this epic work of fantasy. But I want to film it integrally in New Zealand."

"Uh?" the Champion of Death blinked. "With all due respect, err...you are aware of the multitude of environments described by Tolkien, right? We have the woods of Lothlorien, the tunnels dug by the Dwarves in Moria, and of course the dark lands of Mordor, and that's just my first thoughts on the matter."

"I know." The smile managed to be confident and a bit ironic. "I can assure you New Zealand will be able to answer the call. My studio and the teams of special effects are also already there. We might need to hire a few wizards, however. We have only a small magical community on our two principal islands."

"If you say so," Alexandra answered. "I've never visited New Zealand."

She had visited the island-prison of the Exchequer in the Pacific, if 'visit' was the adequate word, but never the Southern Pacific.

"It is a fabulous country, and I urge you to visit...as soon as you will have time for it, of course. I understand you have a very busy schedule."

Yes, one could easily say that.

"The other conditions?"

"The team might need you for some special pyrotechnic effects. I have watched the recordings of the Battle of Westminster Bridge, you know."

She wasn't going to groan. She wasn't going to groan. And the sooner the bridge in question was rebuilt, the better for everyone.

"In addition to that, I'm afraid, there is a lot of paperwork to sign. Magic may just have been revealed to the world this day, but all governments are already busy generating an impressive amount of bureaucracy to cover all eventualities."

Yes, both magical and non-magical organisations were surprisingly alike in that way. Who would have bet ten Galleons upon it?

**24 March 1995, somewhere inside the Villa Borghese Park, Rome, Italy**

Lyudmila feigned to not be annoyed when Alexandra Potter made a detour for the ice cream shop. Unavoidably, it transformed quickly into a session of autograph signing – they had not disguised themselves, and with the recent Fifth Task, more or less everyone knew who they were now.

"You could have ignored them, you know."

"Come on, Chaos," the younger Champion replied while handing her the chocolate ice cream she had asked for ten minutes ago. "We're not in a hurry, the autographs don't cost me anything, and the children were genuinely happy to meet us."

"Are you sure you're not Wisdom in disguise?"

"Well, I've thought to apply for the job," the smirk was really vindictive, and then a long serpentine tongue proceeded to swallow a lot of strawberry and lemon ice cream. "I'm sure I couldn't do a worse job than Falk, at any rate."

Yes, no one could argue against that.

The Chosen of Loki sighed and led them away from the ice cream shop, and they went inside the Villa Borghese Park, trying to lose the growing number of curious witnesses.

While she wouldn't admit it out loud, the sole female Durmstrang Champion acknowledged deep inside the surroundings were nice. Spring had come, and the flowers were blossoming everywhere. Recent rains had made sure the main plants and trees harboured plenty of green.

This apparent beauty wasn't distracting enough for her to forget to cast a Charm which would lead any spy trying to listen to their conversation to need to understand the Babylonian language.

"I think an opportunity has arrived," she said once she was sure once the main risk of being listened to came from the ducks of the park.

The other Champion sighed.

"If we're talking about the desertion of a Knight, I'm not interested by any potential treachery or investigation into the matter."

Lyudmila blinked, then suddenly felt a lot more interested.

"As a matter of fact, it had nothing to do with it," Loki's Chosen replied truthfully. "What happened?"

The green eyes of Death met hers for a few seconds before turning away.

"It seems someone has decided that in the absence of the former King, it might be possible to topple the old order. From what I understand, nine-tenths of the traitors got arrested or killed before they could launch their coup. The Knight Necromancer fled with a few survivors and her whereabouts are currently unknown."

"Interesting," Lyudmila commented. "But that's not an opportunity." If someone was incompetent enough to be caught and have the forces assembled decimated before the first shot of a rebellion was fired, one could hardly say they were someone worth following.

"Yes. To be honest, I'm surprised you didn't hear of it."

"I lost a lot of resources when I refused to return to Saint Petersburg," she admitted, gritting her fangs. "And Loki has been silent for many days lately. Your resources are likely better than mine right now."

The consolation of this was that Alexandra wasn't the type to gloat in these circumstances. The Champion of the Morrigan simply nodded and moved along.

"No, the opportunity I wanted to speak to you about is in Russia. You might have heard there is a war going on."

The expression she was given could be summed-up as 'duh'.

Which was fair: those who hadn't heard of the conflict between magical and non-magical factions were no doubt hermits somewhere far away from civilisation.

"In many countries, there is a relative calm now. The tensions are...not as bad as many feared when the Statute broke. But your homeland is one of those nasty exceptions."

"That's a fair description. In blunt words, the Tsar and his clique are slowly losing their war."

"It isn't exactly unanticipated. The magical population is too largely outnumbered, and the non-magical population doesn't like kneeling to people who are *de facto* foreigners. Worse, the main faction backing the Tsar sees non-wizards as nothing more than insects. The Tsar's assassins could and did assassinate much of the leadership and Imperius the remaining commanders, but the effect of surprise was never going to last."

"Agreed," she might have slightly altered the balance if she intervened, but when there were millions against thousands, any mistake of the outnumbered side would result in a spectacular defeat. And the various Ministries of Magic had not liked the Tsar's regime very much to begin with.

By now, unleashing various types of monstrous hybrids in some cities to install a reign of terror was more an admission that the idiots had no idea what they were doing. The same applied when the Imperiused soldiers were told to slaughter those of their friends who had escaped the first mind-control onslaught.

"But now that they're busy with this war, many mages have been withdrawn from key locations. You remember one of the titles I held until recently?"

"Archduchess of Novgorod?"

"That's the one," she approved. Of course, this was far from the only one; the full address when a herald had to announce her arrival took ten good minutes to utter in its entirety. Yes, it was arrogance incarnate. "As it happened, it was misleading. There was a forest which should have been under my authority, but which wasn't. It was heavily guarded, and I was completely forbidden to go anywhere near it."

"And what was in this forest that had the Tsar so afraid?"

"According to the legends, it is one of the last places on Earth where you can find a root of Yggdrasil, the World-Tree."

Alexandra Potter chuckled.

"They feared you were going to unleash Ragnarok if you got access to it?"

"Probably," Lyudmila smirked back.

The younger girl shook her head while savouring an overdose of strawberry-lemon ice cream.

"Right. I am not going to say their fears were completely baseless, given what I know about you. But I don't see how it is an opportunity."

"Yggdrasil can lead us to Asgard itself."

This didn't seem to impress the other Champion very much.

"And? Asgard was a pocket dimension created by the Power of the Light."

"Not as much as Alfheim." Lyudmila replied confidently.

The Champion of Death rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion.

"Yeah, yeah, not as much as the realm that was more or less the definition of Light. But as Ra expended more and more Light to make sure his troops stayed victorious, everything must have starved there. And though the time of Ragnarok came, I didn't see any Giants attacking Midgard and ushering in more devastation. That's the Enemy's role...and the final battle is certainly when it will escape from the prison of the Black Sun."

"I agree with this theory. But while we know what the Great Enemy is," Apophis was able to fight the two Avatars simultaneously, one could only hope there were not more creatures like that abomination waiting behind the scenes, "we don't know when the final battle is supposed to take place. And yes, I know you were told one, three, or seven years. But it's not enough. I would prefer to have the exact date for when the fate of this reality will be decided."

"And you think that strolling into the private realm dedicated to Odin would give you the answer?" The Morrigan's Chosen was not particularly convinced. "Magic doesn't work like that."

"It doesn't. But Yggdrasil is more than a tree, it's a crossroad of destiny. And with the Seals spreading magic and revitalising everything, plus Fate being unbound, we will be able to journey where no Champion of the Dark could have survived before."

"And the journey itself?"

Lyudmila grinned.

"There is a reason I went through all the trouble to acquire Mjölnir, and that reason isn't the Fifth Task."

"Why am I not surprised?" The British-born witch hissed something that Lyudmila wasn't able to understand. "And the reason you want to involve me in this crazy scheme?"

"Let's not pretend this Prophecy isn't about you. You are the one who is going to lead us in the final battle. I would love to do it myself, of course, but for some reason, people are terrified every time I try to mention the topic."

"For some reason," Alexandra Potter drawled.

"For some reason," she repeated. The effect was ruined by a group of ducks which crossed in front of them to throw themselves into the green-coloured water. Those stupid animals clearly had no self-preservation instinct, unable as they were to notice the presence of two apex-predators.

"You mentioned it was an opportunity," the Champion of Death said in a more decisive voice. "I suppose this has to do with the fact that while the mages of the Tsar are distracted, you don't know when they will return to check nothing problematic happened to this magical location."

"Perceptive, though incorrect: I still have enough sources to know for sure they will be away for the next three days and night."

"So you want to strike soon?"

"Actually," Loki's Chosen bared her fangs, "I suggest we strike tonight."

**25 March 1995, somewhere south of Novgorod, Russia**

If there was some other place which could show a greater contrast to the Park of Villa Borghese they had been visiting this afternoon, Alexandra had no idea which place it was.

The Roman gardens were the definition of charm and beauty. It had been soft water and pretty flowers. Everything had been peaceful, and the spring weather had arrived, caressing everyone's skin and making sure you took the summer clothes out of the wardrobe. The Lady Protector of the Isles wasn't going to say it was a paradise, but the Park was really something she wished more cities had to boast about. It certainly kept the pollution smell away from her nose.

The edge of these woods was nothing like that. First, it was hellishly cold. Furred cloaks were pretty much mandatory if you didn't want to freeze. And while the obscurity was a given as it was very late, everything seemed sinister and screamed 'danger!'

The trees she could perceive with her Hydra eyes gave off a twisted aura. It was a vibe that whispered in your ears that the woods were sick, and they had *chosen* to become that way. For a few seconds, Alexandra had wondered if these were not the lost descendants of angry Ents.

Reluctantly, she dismissed the idea, before focusing again on the major problem.

The forest, as dangerous as it might be, had an entrance leading to the root of Yggdrasil.

And this entrance was guarded, and not with children asking for your autograph.

"I count two hundred and fifty soldiers," Lyudmila told her.

"And they're all Imperiused," she replied. Honestly, it was extremely easy to notice that, night vision or not. The patrols were done in a near-mechanical manner, and her ears had hinted they repeated the same conversations word-for-word several times in the last ten minutes. "Whoever did it, he or she wasn't exactly good at it."

Most wizards and witches thought that casting the Imperium was best done for subtle subversion attempts. The evidence in front of her suggested someone didn't believe in that.

"It's going to take a couple of hours, but I'm confident I can break the Imperius hold upon them," the Hydra Animagus spoke after analysing the situation one last time. "We will have to stun them first, of course."

"It won't work."

"I know you're bloodthirsty at the best of times, Chaos, but I don't kill people just because they have the dubious privilege of being placed between you and something you desire."

"Very funny, Death," the Dark Queen drawled. "Did you notice the painted symbol all the soldiers have upon their foreheads?"

"I did," Alexandra admitted, "but it is no Rune I know, so I assumed it was some kind of military tattoo the soldiers of these companies chose for their parties."

"I wish it was something as nice as that," the Durmstrang Champion grimaced. "And you're definitely right, it is not a Rune. It is a slave-brand."

Alexandra soon imitated the grimace of the older girl.

"Please tell me it can be broken."

"The easiest method is to have magic yourself." Lyudmila informed her. "If you are a witch or a wizard, it doesn't work."

"And if you're not?"

"Then the thing lasts rarely more than three months or four before whoever branded you needs to do the whole thing again. But that's why it is often added after the non-magical targets are Imperiused. The slave-brand and the spell increase each other's potency."

"Of all the things..." Alexandra stopped herself before she began to curse like a sailor. "I suppose that means we don't have the tools on hand to free them."

"There's a Potion to remove the brand, but I don't know how it is brewed. And at the risk of pointing out the obvious, Alexandra, these soldiers have a lot of firepower."

"I know, Lyudmila."

This shouldn't have been a problem if they had brought an army with them, but they had not. They were alone, in the middle of nowhere. There were no reinforcements for them, and unfortunately, the enemy wasn't that limited. At least a good dozen men had their radios active, meaning that if they didn't take them out quickly, the servants of the Tsar would Apparate here as fast as they could to see what had gone wrong near these dark woods.

Oh, and the Imperiused soldiers had tanks and a lot of big guns.

Alexandra hadn't watched a military parade recently, but there were a lot of rifles there. And three of the big cannons had to be artillery pieces. Assuredly there weren't that many of them, but it could kill a lot of people if you charged straight into the storm of explosions.

One couldn't forget the tanks either. Four tanks, and in the darkness, surrounded by soldiers, they looked almost like small hills ready to move and crush you.

"The first priority," the Champion of Death decided, "is to stop them from calling their reinforcements. Since there's a civil war going on here, I doubt it would be much of an international incident, but I would prefer not to be questioned in front of the Wizengamot in the next days why I thought taking a stroll in the middle of a war zone was necessary."

"I understand. Don't worry, I have a plan."

"Am I going to like it?"

"No."

Well, at least tonight the Champion of the Trickster God was honest.

Alexandra breathed out, and then asked the fatal words.

"What do you suggest?"

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"Glory to Asgard."

The man did not know why he had just uttered the words.

But he knew it felt good.

Pleasure came, like it was always supposed to.

The voices praised him.

"Glory to Asgard!"

It was natural. It was comfortable. It was-

"Death to Asgard!"

"Glory to Asgard!" he shouted. There was something wrong. The voices were angry.

The sensation of calm and peace was disrupted.

"DEATH TO ASGARD!"

His weapon was suddenly in his hands, and he began to fire.

"GLORY TO ASGARD!"

There was an explosion. Screams echoed in his ears.

He didn't care.

He fired again.

And it felt good.

"GLORY TO ASGARD!"

And then all a sudden he saw a huge cannon pivoting towards him, and for the first time in days, the control of the Imperius flickered, the mind-control magic faltering against his terror.

There was a roar and everything ended in screams and death.

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Alexandra didn't know if she should be impressed or disgusted.

It had taken three spells – one of them cast by her wand – and one blessing from Chaos, and all the soldiers had killed each other.

Though 'killed' felt insufficient to describe the massacre. 'Slaughtered' might be a better description.

Tanks had unleashed their fury at close-range, transforming human bodies into red mist, and in twenty seconds top, it had sounded like the gates of hell had opened.

The very guns which had stood united against a single enemy had promptly gone to war in a spiralling vortex of madness.

Imperiused men that no doubt had never worshipped the Norse Pantheon had deliberately killed and died with the name of Asgard on their lips.

It took some ten minutes, but at the end? Most of the last Russian soldiers, riddled with bullets, died with fanatical smiles on their lips, the Imperius and the slave-brands making sure to keep their enslavement to the last minute.

Then the last tank exploded, the turret skyrocketing into the heavens, and a storm of flames covered the battlefield, ensuring there would be no survivors out of the two hundred and fifty souls.

Incidentally, if someone wanted to say Chaos wasn't a redoubtable power, Alexandra was ready to teleport him or her here, and show the outcome of this one-sided butchery.

"It seems the Imperius casters, wherever they are, still aren't aware of what happened here."

"The Dissonance Curse is a marvellous tool when your enemy relied too much on the Imperius." The Dark Queen shrugged. "Of course, the idiots made it easier. I'm pretty sure there were only two wizards to brand all these poor bastards and cast the Imperius."

"If they had involved more casters, would it have been more difficult?"

"A bit more, yes. But it's the risk of them noticing something went wrong that would have increased massively." Her expression must have betrayed her incomprehension, because Lyudmila continued, "The mages serving the Tsar are too thinly spread by now. I'm pretty sure each mage able to cast the Imperius has done it thousands of times since the Statute broke."

"Isn't it extremely dangerous for the Tsar's cause?" While it was technically not Dark Magic, the teacher of the aforementioned class had made it clear that one of the best ways to remove an Imperius Curse was to kill the caster or bind his or her magic. "Should one die, it would mean thousands of soldiers and non-magical men released from this mind-control at once."

"It is," Lyudmila nodded her head in agreement. "And I will honestly admit I find it strange, Alexandra. The Tsar is many things, but he's not stupid. The combination of slave-brand and Imperius may appear fool-proof, but it is not. You will need to constantly reapply the enslavement combination, and that means either your mages stay far away from the battlefield, or you are beginning to take massive risks."

"Sooner or later, something is going to break," the Lady Protector murmured.

"Yes. And it is obvious for anyone who is reading a newspaper weekly. There's something we're missing."

Alexandra frowned.

"True, but I don't think these poor bastards here were informed of an eventual 'foolproof plan', assuming it exists in the first place, of course."

"Of course," the Dark Queen of Durmstrang nodded with superb assurance. "You're willing to follow me into the forest?"

"A lot of blood was spilled tonight," Alexandra reported simply. "Let's make sure it isn't wasted."

And deep inside her thoughts, the Sword of Death wondered why the Morrigan had not urged her to remove the Tsar and his subordinates from play. On the Spring Equinox, Alexandra had slain several mages in Africa who had committed foul deeds. And while some of them had been incredibly nastier than the Imperius, they hadn't been done on the scale the Russian wizards were unleashing upon non-magical settlements.

The two Champions stepped forwards, the only source of light being their green eyes. They both did see perfectly in the dark, so lighting the tip of their magical foci may have revealed their position in case an enemy scout arrived at that moment.

Alexandra doubted there was one, however.

Everything reeked of death, and if there were birds or other lifeforms nearby, the Hydra Animagus wasn't able to sense them.

They quickly left the pools of blood and the burning boxes of ammunition behind them.

The woods-

Alexandra felt it in the next couple of seconds.

They had definitely passed through some kind of threshold.

Everything around them suddenly screamed of danger, and her inner animal hissed, wrath pouring into her heart.

"Err..." for the first time in many days, Lyudmila Romanov sounded almost *apologetic*. "It is possible I made a small mistake."

"Yes?" Alexandra changed one of her arms so it was covered in scales and her nails were replaced by claws. It was just in time to tear apart a branch which attempted to decapitate her.

"I thought, from the clues Loki had given me, that the root was at the heart of this forest."

"If you lead us to the wrong location, I am going to strangle you," the Ravenclaw witch didn't really know herself if she was jesting or not.

"What? Oh, no, not that sort of mistake. I just realised that the root of the World-Tree IS the forest. The entire forest, not just its heart. And with the Seal's activation, it must have assimilated an enormous amount of Dark-attuned magic in the last month."

There were malevolent shrieks in the distance.

And all the woods and the darkness seemed to crawl with countless enemies.

Perhaps joking about the Ents had not been a good thing, really...

"To the Gates of Asgard?"

"To the Gates of Asgard," the Champion of Loki approved. "RUN!"

**The Gates of Asgard**

Contrary to what some imbeciles might think, no, fighting against an entire forest was not amusing.

Particularly when you couldn't afford to cast fire spells.

Yes, the very thing that would have made things far easier was impossible: if they burned the woods, clearly whatever magic was there would burn along with it, and it was likely the entire adventure would end there.

Thus the progression through the woods was a contest of endurance.

They had to evade and strike, and as the minutes passed, they had to do more and more of the latter, for as the trees cornered them, there came more and more times when they had to take the blows from the branches and the roots of the extremely violent trees.

It was a very good thing only Lyudmila and she had entered this forest, really. They could heal from all their wounds; the rest of the Exiled and plenty of Tournament Champions would have been unable to boast the same thing.

When at last the assaults receded, her robes were in tatters, and the same could be said of nearly every bit of clothes she had decided to wear tonight. Alexandra could have donned a second set of robes via the Changelina, but preferred to wait.

For all she knew, the forest was only giving them a few seconds of respite before launching a new onslaught of branches and poisoned leaves.

But the trees progressively disappeared, when they didn't flee outright.

Some sort of paved road became visible again.

One hundred footsteps later, the night itself slipped away, and the fingers of dawn's light arrived.

They were not on a path in the middle of the woods; they were on a suspended root of massive size twisting over the void of the stars.

They had left the world of their birth; that much was clear.

The wood was transformed into crystal in many places, and the radiance increased, for with each step they took, it was as if the light's strength was rekindled.

"I can't believe it..."

"Believe," the older Champion replied. "For I think we are the first in countless years to see the myth."

When exactly did the root disappear behind them? Alexandra honestly admitted she would never know.

But at some point for sure, they had left the crossing and were now...elsewhere.

They were on a large paved road which had suffered much from the last millennia and a total lack of maintenance.

There were abandoned farm houses everywhere they looked. Their surroundings were dead and abandoned.

And yet, for all the desolation and the absence of life, there undoubtedly was some great majesty to this place.

You could feel it caress your skin. You could breathe it. You could smell it.

Here the Powers had walked alongside their Champions.

Here there had been some extraordinary things forged.

As if their thoughts were sufficient to conjure it, a large rampart appeared before their very eyes.

It was an indomitable fortification, greater than anything mortals could have forged.

It was easily two hundred metres tall, and one could only guess giants and mages had built the foundations for something so colossal to not fall.

It must have been white or grey at the beginning, but now it was scorched in many places.

And the gate, the crystalline gate-

It was shattered beyond repair.

It had been an artwork, no doubt, but it was destroyed. In fact, everything around the giant gate – it must have been ten metres tall when Mankind was young – was in ruins.

This time there were shrieks anew. But these sounds came from no animal, bird, or living creature.

It came from the monsters.

They stormed out of the breach which had been a gate long ago.

"Draugr," Loki's Chosen spoke coldly.

"According to the legends, they are undead."

"The legends can be wrong, same as everything else."

But in this case, the mistake was almost understandable. The horde of Draugr that was flooding the Asgardian ruins was indeed close in appearance to what you could expect from an army of Inferi that had been recently killed.

Close but not quite.

It was the sensation of *wrongness* which betrayed them.

Alexandra had felt it at Venice, and since Lyudmila had been there for Ra's downfall, she knew the Champion of Chaos was sensing it too.

"I'm beginning to understand why the ancestors of Ra and Osiris were ready to gather all their strength to defeat the Enemy," if this place beyond the normal boundaries of Earth had not been safe, then clearly, *nowhere* was safe from Apophis.

"It was the Twilight of the Gods for their time," the Champion of Chaos murmured, "much like the years to come will be ours."

"Yes," at last the flood of the Draugar decreased before stopping. The entire army had arrived.

There was none of the order of a human army, so a detailed count was near impossible, but there had to be at least ten thousand monsters assembled to bar the way.

"Do you have a nice strategy to propose? Without equalling Wellington at Waterloo-"

A magical artefact was thrown a metre in front of her.

A magical artefact that millions if not billions of souls would recognise.

It was a simple, short-hilted hammer.

And yet, obviously, it was more than that.

"Seriously?" the Champion of House Ravenclaw snorted.

"We're before the Gates of Asgard, and while I don't much trust the Prophecies, so far they've been correct."

"The Prophecy was speaking about swords, Lyudmila."

"The funny thing with languages is that their meaning is altered as humans change with them. Who can say if the original word wasn't 'Symbol of the Powers' instead of 'Sword'?"

"I certainly didn't expect a Linguistic-Philosophy lesson from you when we started this freaking Tournament."

The young Champion sighed.

"Are you worthy? If yes, Cast thy Lightning and reign over the ashes."

Alexandra stayed silent for several seconds.

This moment of reflexion was interrupted by an avalanche of shrieks; the monstrous horde was done waiting, and now the slaves of the Enemy, the Draugr, were on the offensive.

Alexandra made two steps forwards and grabbed the hilt of the hammer.

It felt as if it weighed heavier than a mountain.

It felt like she was judged.

It felt like every life she'd ever taken was flashing before her eyes.

Maybe everything was true. Maybe none of it was.

There was something primal here, and though it wasn't Fragarach, this was more than a mere substitute.

This was both an artefact and a magical focus.

Magic sang, and the call was made.

Already her elemental affinity was roaring, and sparkles of emerald light came into existence.

It took an enormous amount of mental strength to raise the hammer over her head, but she achieved it.

"**Mjölnir**," and at this moment, there was no doubt that the Power of Lightning, long cursed into dormancy by the Wars of Light and the Dark, was back. "**FULMEN IMPERATOR**!"

The spell should have been beyond her ability to fuel and unleash.

But the weapon she wielded was no ordinary artefact.

It was-

It was Lightning shaped into metal.

The ruined plains of Asgard were there one moment.

The next second, the apocalypse of thunder and heavenly bolts came.

Thirteen storms of lightning coalesced and unleashed their wrath.

And when they stopped, it was hard not to gape.

The Draugr had been incinerated. The entire army was nothing but ashes, soon dispersed by the first gust of wind that they experienced since they'd entered the realm of Asgard.

"You see? That's what you can do when you stop your pragmatic plans."

Alexandra groaned loudly and fell to her knees, Mjölnir smashing into the ground.

"Remind me to smash you when you are trying to be funny again." Damn it, this had taken a lot out of her...as could be expected when removing an entire army of monsters from the battlefield. "What now?"

"Now, we try to find the answers we seek," Loki's Chosen said in a very serious tone. "We must find the Tower of the Bifröst."

**The ruins of Asgard**

Asgard was the biggest series of ruins she'd ever seen, far bigger than anything Rome and Athens combined could take pride in.

And yet Asgard was not dead.

Asgard was rebuilding itself, as lightning magic, her magic, poured into the ruins and restored the foundations of fountains and walls. Thousands of stones were levitating back to where they had once been emplaced, and even rubble was taking more pleasant shapes again.

"You knew that was going to happen," Alexandra accused the Dark Queen.

"Guilty as charged," the older girl replied with a large grin. "It might create a new realm entirely, you know. No longer the Realm of Heaven, but the Realm of Lightning. In Swedish, that would sound like Blixtheim, or something like that."

"That's a horrible name," she complained. "But I have to admit it sounds far more accurate than Asgard. The home of the Aesir doesn't have any of its original inhabitants left."

"The Draugr were trapped for an eternity in these ruins. One couldn't expect any survivors. Ah, here is the Tower."

As could be expected, the grandiose proclamation was definitely ironical. The 'tower' in question had something like ten stones still piled up. As for the gargantuan bridge which had existed millennia ago, there were only a few broken pillars left, and then there was the abyss.

The thing had really been smashed to oblivion; this reeked of Apophis' malevolence.

"This is going to take some hours and a lot of magic." Lyudmila commented after a modest shrug.

"You want to rebuild the Bifröst?"

"The Bifröst is indestructible, Alexandra. But the artefacts to control it are gone, they were in the Tower. So I'm going to do the same you've done for the whole city, but on a much smaller scale."

"And how long are we talking about?"

"As long as it needs to be," the blonde witch smiled. "This is the way we're going to return to the Venetian school, after all."

Gungnir appeared in her hands, and a shroud of pure darkness surrounded the spear.

The golden metal stabbed a hole that hadn't been there seconds ago, and three heartbeats later, the equivalent of an onyx-coloured pyre was burning.

Now, Alexandra was not an expert in symbolism and all rituals, but she could add two plus two.

"It was always your plan to take control of the Bifröst while leaving me the rest of the dimension to rebuild and rule over." The Hydra Animagus didn't even bother turning it into a question.

"Now why would I do that?"

"Strategic leverage," the Champion of the Morrigan replied while raising an eyebrow. "No matter what we think of it, the chief abomination isn't going to do us a favour and let us gather everything we need to destroy it. Fair fights are for imbeciles, after all. But if we have the Bifröst to teleport massive numbers of troops anywhere on the planet, we have a chance to limit the collateral damage and risk a sneak attack before the Enemy can ramp up."

"True. Is it the point I'm going to pretend to do you a favour?" The carnivorous grin was truly *lupine*, right now.

Alexandra sighed.

"I suppose that your Power was the only one of the Dark which could reasonably know all the intricacies of this ancient tower-artefact. But I am not blind; you have deeper motives than *that*."

"It's in the spirit of cooperation! I can't step into Asgard without your permission, and you won't be able to use the Bifröst without mine. Thus we will need each other."

"I'm impressed that you can afford to say it without bursting into laughter," the Ravenclaw drawled, before turning her head.

The output of magic was downright impressive, and the stones emerging from the darkness were adding up quickly. The edifice was already two metres-tall and each 'face' of the square-shaped tower seemed to be approximately ten metres-wide.

"Do we need the rainbow bridge to go to the place where our questions will be answered?"

"We might try the adventure without it, but I would prefer waiting," the Champion of Loki said in an uncharacteristic display of prudence. "Without it, we don't have a contingency plan if there are some complications and-"

An explosion of Light blinded them.

"Oh come on!"

"I don't understand! The Bifröst Tower is still incomplete! It is not-"

When her eyes were able to see the landscape of Asgard, it was like a sea of rainbows had replaced the great abyss.

It was truly impressive, and any other day, she might have sung a bit about its beauty.

Today she was going to pass.

Merely a dozen metres away from where they stood, three figures had been ejected from the Bifröst.

And Alexandra was rather sure she'd never seen them before.

They were clearly magical.

No, they were more than that.

They were *Champions*.

Two were boys, close to adulthood. Not as old as Neville Longbottom had been transformed by the Grail, but if they weren't at least sixteen, Alexandra was ready to eat the pointed hat of her Hogwarts uniform.

It was a minor consolation, but the newcomers seemed as surprised as they were to be here.

And the girl-

Alexandra was pretty sure she knew her. The resemblance with Fleur Delacour was uncanny, to say the least. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed, the body of a supermodel that could convince plenty of boys and girls to sell their souls in a futile attempt to have that sort of beauty, everything was there. But it was not Fleur Delacour.

The face, the determination...it was her younger sister. Or what the Phoenix's younger sister should look like at sixteen or seventeen. Last time Alexandra had seen her, the girl was really young. Here, she was old enough to pass as a very convincing twin of the Champion of Life.

"Drop your wands and reveal your allegiances!" the brown-haired boy called out with the arrogance of-

Yeah, those were Gryffindor robes. The Delacour look-alike was in a sort of attire mixing Beauxbatons colours and Valkyrie-themed armour, but the boys were in enchanted Hogwarts robes of black, but the trim was red and gold.

"When you intrude in a place where you are unwanted," Lyudmila chided them with her usual arrogance, "it is only polite to introduce yourself first."

"I am Gabrielle Delacour, Champion of Life," well, at least that was a confirmation that was a mystery by itself.

"I am Adrian McKinnon, Champion of Order," the brown-haired wizard told them bravely, and Alexandra thought she saw something of Leo Black in him for a second.

The last boy drew his wand and took a duelling stance which was so imperfect that Flitwick would have facepalmed. There was something strange about him. The green eyes...they were almost like hers. And there was a badly healed scar on his forehead. A scar which had an eerie resemblance to the one of Longbottom, a lightning bolt. Now that the light of the Bifröst was more tolerable, the Sword of Death could assess he was one head smaller than the two other Champions, and quite thin for his age.

His glasses were quite ridiculous, of course, and totally-

"My name is Harry Potter, Champion of Fate. Now introduce yourselves, Black Witches!"

WHAT?

**The Bifröst, the First and Last Bridge before Ragnarok**

Harry Potter had expected the astonishment of the first seconds.

He hadn't expected the laughter of the tall blonde which came after.

"Why are you laughing at my name?" he tried not to snap, but it was difficult.

The Champion of the Dark smiled, and suddenly, it was like staring at Voldemort's gigantic snake, only with a prettier face.

"You are in presence," the blonde-haired witch began, "of Alexandra Potter, Chosen of the Morrigan, Champion of Death, Archmage Slayer, Lady Protector of the Isles, Descendent and Bane of the Conqueror, and more titles that I feel motivated to recite here and now."

What?

No, please someone tell him that was a joke. The green eyes were familiar, but this couldn't be-

"And she is accompanied," the black-haired girl spoke softly, "by Lyudmila Romanov, Chosen of Loki, Champion of Chaos, Archduchess of Novgorod in exile, and new Guardian of the Bifröst. You can kneel."

They didn't, of course. Harry hadn't knelt before Voldemort despite the bastard nearly breaking his back, and he wasn't going to begin now!

"What are you doing here?"

"What are *we* doing here? Are you sure you should be asking that question?" He was really beginning to dislike these two girls, and the meeting had begun only seconds ago. "This is the Asgard tied to *our* reality, oh Champion."

"So you say," Gabrielle intervened.

"The Tower of the Bifröst has not finished its reconstruction," the Russian named Black Witch replied. "No one here could activate it in millennia, and it will take at least some time before it is going to change. You have a functional Bifröst, something that should be by all rights impossible here. Therefore it stands to reason you are coming from a place which does not belong to *this* Asgard."

"Okay," Adrian said, trying to be the peace-maker as always. "You're right. We're not from this Asgard. But we need to reach the top of Yggdrasil. Otherwise Apophis is going to-"

The very world seemed to shake, and the rainbow radiance of the bridge dimmed.

"There are names that must not be uttered lightly," the girl who had been introduced as Alexandra Potter said coldly. "Especially in a place that the Draugr have ravaged for aeons."

"A simple mistake, but the Light's ignorance reigns supreme as always," the other Black Witch sneered like a Slytherin. She clicked her fingers, and there was a miniature explosion of Dark Magic. Gods, how powerful was she? "No."

"We only want to find a solution to get rid of...the Enemy."

The Champion of Chaos looked at his friend like he was a worm.

"Then allow me to make sure you don't waste your time, fool. There is no satisfying situation waiting for you anywhere. The First Empire was nearly entirely destroyed facing this abomination, and they scattered the different parts of its essence before sealing them. Do you really think that an alternative is going to appear out of nowhere just like that?"

"We have no choice," Harry tried to keep the despair out of his voice, but he knew his voice had to be grim. "The Great Enemy has been sealed into a Dark Sun with Archmage Ra, though fortunately he took the Avatar of Darkness with him too-"

This time it was the turn of the girl who shared his family name to explode in laughter.

"Fortunately? Fortunately? Oh, this is priceless!" It took him a few seconds to acknowledge there was no joy at all in the sound. And the hilarity abruptly ended like one had switched a button. "There is nothing fortunate at all in what happened in your reality, *Harry Potter*. The Enemy is going to devour both Avatars, assuming it is not already done, and his power will grow proportionally as a consequence. You have not earned a respite, you signed your own death warrant."

"And what happened in *your* reality, pray tell?" Gabrielle asked viciously.

"I ended Ra, of course." The green eyes stared at his girlfriend like she was prey. "But alas not before that moron imprisoned the soul of the Enemy into his twin brother, who had no choice but to imprison himself into the Dark Sun."

"Voldemort must have loved that," the French Veela snickered after the shock faded and it appeared the younger girl was not joking.

"Voldemort is dead. I ended him too, though I admit it was more of a mercy kill given what others had already done to him."

Alexandra Potter yawned, and her teeth changed into fangs in an unnatural manner.

An Animagi, and since she was a Champion of Death, likely a magical one. Fantastic.

"This is all fascinating, but we have a mission."

"You couldn't live up to your failure," the Chaos-damned witch stated with iron-clad certainty. "And I'm ready to bet half of the gold I have left that you had to evacuate the Bifröst Tower somewhere else after it fell to the Enemy for the second time. A lot of effort for nothing, I'm sure."

"You are as much in danger as we are, otherwise you wouldn't be here!" Gabrielle retorted.

"We came here to see how much time we had left before the end," the Champion of Death admitted. "And my fellow Champion thought the Bifröst would provide certain advantages given how it allows the transport of large quantities of people near-instantaneously across Earth and other realms. But no, we aren't as much in danger as you are. We fought the Great Enemy once, and we have learned from our mistakes. Furthermore, the Age of the Light is over. The Statute is gone. We have options that you seem to sorely lack."

'The Statute is gone'. Merlin's beard, how many deaths and destruction were these two Black Witches responsible for?

"This is dreadful news."

"Why? Because you think the Enemy is going to spare the billions of non-magical people when Ragnarok arrives?" the younger girl asked in what was certainly intended to be a rhetorical question. "The only reason why we didn't spread the news right now was to avoid panic on all continents. But many military forces are already preparing. Please tell me at least that you have a better plan than visiting another Asgard and hoping a miraculous solution drops in your lap."

"Hey!" Harry wished at this moment he could strangle this Black Witch, but they had been warned there were certain rules to travels like this one. "Even after Professor Dumbledore gave us the Arithmantic formula, we had to brew a high-level Potion and cast several powerful Light rituals."

Hatred flared in the green eyes of the Champion of Death, and Harry realised too late it had been the wrong thing to say.

"Of course it was one of Dumbledore's idea," the black-haired witch spat. "The imbecile-in-chief doesn't know anything worthwhile, and is responsible for half of the disasters of today, but he's not going to fight on the frontline until the day is lost, is he?"

"Dumbledore is the greatest wizard alive!" Suddenly, it felt as if he was facing Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets again.

Harry expected for his evil counterpart to snarl that the man had been chased away by a mere memory, or something like that, but it never came.

Instead there was an expression of disgust on her face.

"So that's what I could have become if I had ended up in Gryffindor. Pathetic."

"I bet the Slytherins let you see you the truth of purging 'Mudbloods' and 'Blood-Traitors', eh?"

"I am a Ravenclaw, and no, they didn't teach me anything." The Black Witch turned away. "Lyudmila? We have wasted enough time, and I know you have been given enough time to disrupt their Bifröst connection."

"I have," the blonde-haired monster proclaimed happily. "But it was so funny to see the stupider version of yourself prove that one can manage to exist without brains. Do you think it is because he is a boy?"

"No. When you lick the shoes of Albus Dumbledore from dawn to dusk, you don't have time for anything else."

"Ouch," the Chaos bitch bared her teeth, and she too had her teeth transforming into fangs. "Well, sorry, but Death is right. We have spent too much time here, and we have business elsewhere. Say goodbye and-"

"Duel!" He couldn't let this opportunity escape them! It was their last chance to save the world from Apophis! "You say you are better than me? I dare you to prove it! I challenge you to a duel, Alexandra Potter!"

\*\*\*\*

He couldn't be serious.

The last Champion of Fate-

Ah yes, this one didn't know what she had done to Neville Longbottom at Venice.

Still, there was no reason to risk her life now.

These Champions of Light didn't belong here. And one could only hope the Apophis of their reality would not use something similar to invade this Asgard.

"Lady Morrigan?" she asked just for confirmation.

"**You have nothing to win here, my Champion, and everything to lose. And of the three, none are known for their deep respect of the one-on-one duelling rules**."

It was really nice to have the confirmation, though there had been pretty big hints before. This idiotic male copy from another dimension had certainly not been taught by Flitwick at any point **in** his studies.

The Lady Protector nodded.

"No, I respectfully decline. Lyudmila, banish them."

"FOR THE PHOENIX AND THE LIGHT!"

At this moment, Alexandra was strongly reminded of Leo Black. They did not have the same physical appearance, but they certainly showed the same stupidity.

The three Light Champions tried to charge.

The key word was 'tried', of course.

There were plenty of gigantic stones levitating all around, and it would have been a shame to not use the opportunity.

"Wingardium Leviosa Tria! Depulso Maxima!"

The bombardment unleashed lightning-fused stone.

Most of it missed largely.

But the Delacour fanatic tripped and had to take several steps back. And as she did, the Bifröst dissolved into midst behind her, and the Life Champion vanished with it.

The McKinnon wizard – an interesting revelation, since the entire House had died here during the war against Voldemort – managed to get closer, but a rock smashed him fifteen metres away, and this was sufficient for the dissolving effect to catch up. A couple of seconds, and he was gone.

Unfortunately, it left the third.

Alexandra opened her hand, and Lyudmila threw her Mjölnir for the second time of the day.

It was just in time to block the shining blade of her enemy.

Lightning clashed with fire, and the impact would have broken her arms if she wasn't a Hydra Animagus.

This was no normal blade, assuredly. And-

Ah.

"So you have found the sword of Godric Gryffindor. I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised."

"I killed a Basilisk with it!"

Alexandra snorted, all the while focusing on making sure the flames descending from the blades were banished by her lightning.

"Please. I killed two, and on the same day. And I eliminated a bunch of Junior Death Eaters for good measure."

The Power of Fate was trying to tip the scales in favour of its Champion, Alexandra felt it.

But the Morrigan was here, and Death was no longer bound to lose anymore.

Once upon a time, the Dark would have lost ten times out of ten, but no longer.

"I won the Triwizard Tournament!" Damn, this version of her was arrogant enough to think besting two or three wizards was something to take pride in?

"Well, I didn't," the pathetic copy seemed to inflate in self-satisfaction, before she continued. "But then the European Magical Tournament is not over. And I have a feeling my fellow competitors are way more competent than yours will ever be."

"I am the Chosen One!"

"You are Fate's bitch and Dumbledore's puppet," Alexandra corrected. "And that's all you will ever be."

The Hydra Animagus poured more power into Mjölnir, and reality shook.

The other Bifröst shook and its last rainbow radiance vanished.

The Lightning imbued by Death and the Fires of Fate struck at each other mercilessly, two forces turned utterly incompatible by the folly of Ra.

The wizard calling himself Harry Potter vanished.

But before he did, Alexandra had the satisfaction of watching the sword of Gryffindor break.

Alexandra breathed out in relief as the three enemies were gone.

"Well, it was really epic and-"

"Lyudmila," the Champion of Death sighed. "Let me catch my breath and enjoy my victory for...ten seconds. Please."

"I wish, I could, Alexandra. But look on your right."

Alexandra did follow the suggestion, and the young witch wondered if she was not suffering a hallucination.

There was a stairway which had not been there before.

There was an impossible stairway of rainbow colours climbing up into the sky of Asgard!

"Yes," Loki's Chosen nodded. "It seems your victory was enough to open us the way."

**The End of the Stairway**

The climb lasted an eternity.

It was dangerous.

There was no guardrail, and even if she had stocked her new Firebolt inside the Changelina as a luxury accessory, there were doubts whether it would function correctly.

They climbed up so high with these rainbow stairs that everything save the skyscraper-tall Tower of the Bifröst began to look tiny and impossibly far away.

And as she was beginning to ask herself when it would end, there was a gate of stone at the end of the ascension.

It was a crude entrance, and the only decoration was provided by faded Runes. Alexandra thought that they were Eldar Futhark, but the glyphs were so far gone there was no way to know for sure.

The tunnel was dark.

There was humidity, and the magic protecting it diminished the ability of her eyes.

There was no solution but to advance slowly, their footsteps resonating loudly.

Several times part of the path collapsed under their feet.

It was with a certain relief that the tunnel was replaced by a large cavern, and then by an even bigger one.

Or at least, it would have been if the second cavern had not had an illustrious prisoner.

It didn't take a lot of time for the name to be on her lips, to be honest.

You didn't need to be a specialist of Norse mythology, for how many beings were chained in eternal torment by the guts of their dead children?

How many divine beings had been sentenced to have the venom of a snake flowing over their faces?

And once you had discarded all the other possibilities, all that remained was the truth.

The Chosen of the Morrigan didn't know how it was possible, but they had reached him.

"**Ah, visitors, it had been far too long**," more venom flowed, and the floor of the cavern shook.

"Lord Loki," Alexandra made a curt bow. Yeah, it definitely explained some things.

Lyudmila's reaction was more interesting...she knelt.

"I have done as you commanded."

"**And you did it well**," Loki praised her. "**I laughed for quite a long time as I saw you dealing with these troublemakers sent by Fate**."

"Were they saying the truth?"

"**Does it count as one of your questions?"** The voice was incredibly seductive, it was almost like listening to a Succubus' voice again, honey and seduction in one sound...but there was something else behind it. Something extremely dangerous.

"No," Alexandra replied.

"**Too bad**," the Aspect of Chaos chuckled. "**But then you are not as gullible as the fools of the Light**."

Describing Loki accurately was impossible. Its appearance was ever-changing. Sometimes the immortal was a gigantic fish, other times he was a giant. Sometimes he was a serpent.

The Ravenclaw girl guessed he was all of that at once and more.

And she really felt ill-prepared to speak with a being like that. The tales and the legends had not exaggerated his wits. Really, it felt to her the skalds had underestimated his cunning.

This would have been bad enough, but one couldn't forget the last piece of bad news: when Loki would escape this cruel punishment, then Ragnarok would be imminent.

It was not difficult to logically analyse the tools and the problem. The guts serving as bindings were ever-adapting to make sure none of Loki's metamorphoses could lead to him escaping. It would take powerful magical weapons to even make a dent in one.

And what a strange coincidence! They had just brought Gungnir and Mjölnir into this very cavern, something that other Powers of the Light would have heavily frowned about.

Alexandra carefully watched the bindings anew. There were seven of them, and all of them had been covered in Runes.

"I presume that someone as attentive as you, Lord Loki, wishes to exchange critical pieces of information for the only thing you value more than knowledge."

"**You presume correctly**." The grin was sadistic in the extreme, or it would have been if more venom didn't fall in his eyes, bringing more pain. "**And since I am generous today, I will speak honestly: I want to be *free***."

The sheer emotion behind this word made her shiver.

"And hypothetically speaking, why should I agree to it? The information I have, both from Light and Dark chroniclers, does not incite any optimism where you are concerned, Lord Loki."

"**Why shouldn't you**?" the God who had engineered the death of Baldur retorted. "**Ragnarok is coming for Midgard and the rest of the realms. Nothing I or the others can do will change that reality. When the prison of the Black Sun will end, it will be up to you to face the Devourer of Hope. And you will need the magic of Chaos by your side for the final battle**."

"And no Champion of yours can break these bindings. Otherwise Lyudmila would have tried the adventure alone."

The blonde Dark Queen abandoned her kneeling position and didn't show much contrition.

"I didn't lie, did I?"

"You seriously obfuscated the truth," Alexandra sighed. "Which is per the norm for a Champion of Loki, I suppose."

She turned her stare to the imprisoned God.

"For every question asked, I want a clear and precise answer. No trick, no clever word play. The stakes are just too high."

"**I agree to these terms, Chosen of the Morrigan**."

Alexandra breathed out. It felt incredibly risky. No, it was risky, no doubt about it.

But the answer to the first question would pretty much decide how urgent the counter-measures for Apophis had to be, and trapped here in a realm saturated with the Great Enemy's presence, Loki could answer where the Prophets and the Seers couldn't.

"How long do we have until the prison of the Black Sun breaks and the abomination will crawl out to destroy Mankind's Cradle?"

"**Once you will leave Asgard**," Loki spoke slowly, relishing the attention, "**there will remain ninety-four million six hundred and seventy thousand eight hundred and fifty-six seconds before the prison will break down. Then you will have seven seconds until the end, oh Queen of Lightning. Time enough for you, perhaps, to save the world**."

This sounded like three years, though she would have to verify to be sure. The 'seven years scenario' was likely denied to them, then. It was not good, but the Hydra hadn't thought they would be granted so much time.

Alexandra nodded, and then she raised the legendary hammer.

Mjölnir felt way lighter than it had been when she first touched the hilt.

She struck.

She didn't think she had used all her might, but there was a sense of...destiny which went into the move.

The first binding shattered.

There was an enormous explosion.

And Lyudmila began to scream.

The Dark Queen fell in a prostrated position, and her limbs shook uncontrollably, as if she was possessed by some evil entity.

"What have you done to-"

"**Is it one of your questions, Alexandra Potter**?"

"No," she fought the urge to insult the God of Mischief and Chaos. Something told her it wouldn't end well...for her.

As the seconds passed, it became clear that Lyudmila Romanov wasn't possessed.

No, it was clear she was changing.

Sometimes her hair turned into an extraordinary blonde colour that even Lyre de Male-Foi would have envied, before a second later it took a vibrant red colour.

This was a series of uncontrollable transformations...including some the Champion of Chaos should definitely not have. While some wolfish traits were kind of expected, several times the tattered robes exploded to show iridescent scales. Other times the skin of the Durmstrang Champion became blue before returning to a more human colouration.

And it was impossible. All laws of magic insisted that you could only take a single inner animal's essence into your soul. Those wizards and witches who had tried for a second generally imploded in a gory fashion or had just enough time to regret how much of a bad idea it had been. No one in living history had ever been able to master two Animagus transformations and survive. And at Venice, when Sforza had become the Champion of Tlaloc, her new Animagus form had erased the previous one; she still had a single Animagus form, and the skill to keep her old one had never manifested.

"She is more than your Champion," Alexandra cast a Charm to mitigate the pain, but her eyes remained on Loki. It wasn't a question, but her accusatory tone had to be clear.

"**She is in many ways my daughter**," the Aspect of Chaos seemed to find the whole scene incredibly amusing. "**Unfortunately for my plans, her potential was sealed by narrow-minded souls unable to see further than their noses. But now she is going to be able to use her true power**."

Her potential was sealed? But Lyudmila was-

She was easily among the ten most powerful mages of the European continent, and that was with her having potentially decades to grow stronger.

Alexandra didn't think often that wizards and witches were given unfair advantages. She was a Hydra Animagus, and despite not being fifteen, she had largely the raw power to be considered a Lady of Magic. The Champion of the Light had had to place the threshold of cheating to absurd degrees for her to feel outraged.

But here? Yeah, this was not so much earthshaking as it was breaking all laws of magic.

Lyudmila transformed entirely into her Animagus body, forcing her to jump aside, before returning to a human appearance.

The Dark Queen was panting, but she didn't seem to be in pain anymore.

"**Now, Alexandra Potter**," and this time, the last Potter definitely felt the urge to sprint out of this cavern and forget everything which had occurred in the last six minutes. "**I believe you have six questions left**."

**Author's note**:

There are plenty of good reasons why Loki was imprisoned like he was...

And of course, bargaining with the Power of Chaos always carries great risks. As the proverb says, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

Of course, once it is done, Sixth Task will come soon after that.

Ragnarok can't be denied for long, Chosen.

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