**Chapter 45**

**Darkness Comes**

*For the witches and wizards of this century, they were known as the Exchequer.*

*It was far from the only name they have called themselves in the last millennium. In Southern America, they were feared under the name of Patient Serpent. Further north, centuries before the first Europeans had the idea of sailing westwards to see if the earth was truly round, the inhabitants waged war against them and designated them the Dark Beasts. In Scandinavia, their legend was firmly entrenched in the magical communities as the Lords of Dusk. Many African wizards cut off from the outside world were aware of the Implacable Shadow. Asiatic wand-wielders shivered in terror when the Jaws of Abyss were mentioned.*

*It was an endless list of names. Many were self-titled, while others had been given by their few enemies skilled and lucky enough to survive a battle against them. Sometimes it was their ‘allies’, Dark Lords or Dark Ladies of considerable power, who gave them the nicknames written in obscure books.*

*There were many grand hunts, heroic quests, and extensive investigations to destroy this mysterious threat.*

*Centuries after centuries, they all failed without exception. For the Light wizards and governmental authorities fighting against them, the outcome each time was incredibly frustrating and disappointing. Their enemies moved shrouded in shadows and lies, supporting Dark-aligned forces with funds and frightening magical lore before disappearing in the shadows once more when the Dark Lord or Lady of the times was pulverised by an unstable ritual or massacred by a rampaging crowd.*

*Sometimes, their goals were clear: the missing artefacts, dead wizards, or collapsing empires were all too visible for the surviving warriors watching their homes burn. Often, the politicians and historians spent the last decades of their life pondering why such wasteful or illogical courses of actions had been made.*

*There were a few points which had been determined with clarity. Whoever these powerful beings were, there were unquestionably wizards and witches of great power and Dark Nature. They never emerged victorious at the end of a conflict, preferring to disappear into the shadows long before the final battle was about to begin. They were dangerous. They were never to be underestimated.*

*They were the dagger you never saw coming before until it was too late.*

*You didn’t fear the darkness because their powers were based on it; you feared the darkness because they brought it with them.*

*In hindsight, Grindelwald and Voldemort were just children playing with toy wands before they came out of the shadows.*

*Europe was not prepared. The International Confederation of Wizards was not prepared. The world was not prepared.*

*And we paid for it.*

Extract from *The* *Rise of Darkness*, Prologue, by Gilderoy Lockhart.

**12 June 1993, Village of Rashtam, England**

Bloody Ear was a bored wererat.

Worse he was a bored wererat and he knew it was going to continue that way for several months. He knew it because Piercing Fang had told him the bad news himself. Bloody Ear was too good for the big operation, the brown-furred leader had said. They couldn’t afford to lose him, he had said. Strong wererats of the rodere were going to be needed to train a second generation in the next months. Bloody Ear would be a great claw-leader, Diseased Claw and Piercing Fang had promised it on the bones and the blood of the warriors fallen in the Blood War.

He was a bored wererat, in an abandoned village of Northern England, waiting for a new call which would not come before late August-early September at the earliest. Weeks ago, when they had transformed their new claw-siblings there, the village had been full of activity. The vampires and the mercenaries had helped modify the memories of the surrounding towns so everyone would forget the village had ever existed, car-drivers had been hunted, and the inhabitants had been feasted upon. The fat and useless teenagers had been transformed into hungry and inexperienced wererats before joining the bloodbath.

But it was over now, until next time. Bloody Ear could not wait for this delicious feast. The first phase of the great plan had worked perfectly, they had built an army and the hated wand-wielders had not known anything! What a brilliant idea it was to recruit the criminals and the useless Muggles! No one cared when they disappeared, and the moment they transformed, the rodere had a lot of claw-squads ready to fight. They lost some of them during the first full moons, but there were too many Muggles anyway, right? These dumb creatures reproduced faster than rats and wererats combined, it wasn’t like they were going to notice when a few hundred went missing.

Still, he was bored. Piercing Fang had given him three commands before leaving. First, no one was to discover where the new members of the rodere had gone. The cages and the pens thus had been broken in different parts, the last corpses eaten or burned. Bloody Ear himself had no idea where the training camp was, except that it was overseas and well-secured. Second, he had to make sure the base was still a base until the return of the big-ferocious leaders. Kill everyone who comes here, they had said, and leave no traces of their existence. Third, the vans and the cars they owned and had decorated with this stupid ‘Saint Brutus’ logo had to be maintained and repaired. Fortunately, two of the ten he had been able to keep with him had had experience with that before their first full moon. They had lost some of their memories since then, but they remembered enough.

His powerful ears heard a car in the distance come in this direction. Had he not been a wererat, he would have probably missed it as the motor noise was low and stopped after a few seconds. But it was there, Bloody Ear was sure of it. And by the way the other members of the claw-group had raised their ears and stopped their discussions, he knew they had heard it too.

“White Fury, NO!” But his order came too late. The white-furred wererat had already taken the vial of Rat’s Surge he was keeping in a necklace around his large neck. Already, the drug was beginning its process, triggering the change which before was impossible if there was no full moon. Fuelled by the eagerness of the young wererat, the effect was quick. Nails became claws. The teeth-filled mouth became a maw of fangs. Clothes were ripped off as white fur covered everything – and Bloody Ear would not pay him a new pair of trousers – the tail grew out and White Fury fell on his four paws. Ten seconds ago, there had been a young human in ragged clothes. Now, there was a white pony-sized rat, trying his best to get out of the mess he had once called his clothes under the laughter of his claw-brothers.

Bloody Ear screamed to the young fool to stop, to not fall to the hunger, but he could have talked to the walls of the ruined village they were currently standing in for the good it did. White Fury sniffed several times to fill his senses with the smell of the humans in the vicinity and then sprinted out onto the main street, destroying two dustbins and a stone sculpture of an angel they had not yet pulverised in their boredom.

“Remember why we kept this one?” grumbled Patient Hunter. In his human appearance, the old wererat looked sixty, but Bloody Ear knew he was in reality close to ninety years old – he was likely the oldest wererat alive in Britain. Unlike some new recruits, if the fur of Patient Hunter was grey when he shifted, it was because of age, not because it was his initial fur colour.

“He fights well and is loyal.”

That was all he had the time to say before a loud whining resonated. White Fury had apparently found his prey. Four or five of his claw-group chuckled; they were aware that soon there would be a blood-soaked youngster coming back, telling them how good he was at hunting worthless Muggles.

And then the sound of gun fire was heard.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Three rounds soon followed by five more...and finally the great agonised scream of a wererat.

“Oh, shit.”

After a moment, he realised it was him who had said that.

Bloody Ear knew only Muggle weapons could make that thunderous and ear-shattering noise. And by his shocked face, he knew Patient Hunter had recognised it too. This wasn’t supposed to be possible. They had taken all precautions possible, and there had been no unwelcome visitors in the last week. There was no reason for anyone to come in the middle of nowhere with guns to track wererats they didn’t know existed!

“You seven,” he ordered to the group which had been playing poker and those watching it. “Rat’s Surge, now!”

For once, the claw-members obeyed without questions, sensing the hour of pleasantry was over. One by one they swallowed the blood-coloured vials and one by one, the claws, fangs, fur, and tail replaced the weak human legs and arms. The shifting was not happening at the same speed for everyone of course, the most experienced among them were already half-way to it, while the weakest were still on their two legs.

Patient Hunter and he were going to wait here. They were the most experienced and the reserves of Rat’s Surge the rodere had left here were not endless...

“Good afternoon.”

Three of his claw-pack hissed at the interruption and nine pairs of eyes, human or rat, turned in the direction of the human voice. To Bloody Ear’s great surprise, it did not come from an alley, a balcony, or in front of a house. No, the voice’s owner was standing on the roof of the village’s town hall.

He had good eyes and was quite close. It was not difficult to see the owner was a ‘she’ and the human was quite young. They may have recruited several younger teenagers in the last month, but it was not likely. As far human children went, this one was wearing normal clothes...dark blue jeans and a lighter blue T-shirt. Her long black hairs were flowing in the wind and she had bright green eyes. A few more years, and this girl would be quite a good bed-warmer...not that she would have the chance. Bloody Ear didn’t know how she had arrived here, but it did not matter. She knew the location of their base, thus she had to die.

“Good afternoon,” repeated the girl, slightly turning her head to watch the transforming wererats. In turn, the move allowed him to see a rather large sword in a scabbard on her back. “I am searching for my cousin, a fellow named Dudley Dursley. Have you heard of him?”

Too bad for her, but Bloody Ear had no wish to answer her stupid questions.

“Digger, Hunger. Kill her.” The two had completed their transformation and would surely be enough to deal with this girl. She had to be a decoy, while the real soldiers were surrounding them with their damned guns. “The rest of you, track their shooters.”

His steadfast claw-killers did not need more orders to race towards the ancient town hall and began to climb at a formidable speed which had surprised a lot of Muggles and wand-wielders in the past.

“I suggest you call back your pet monsters.” Bloody Ear had expected fear, insults, or a loud call for reinforcements. But the girl on the roof...she looked positively amused, judging by the smirk on her lips. Despite his experience, he felt his anger spike. How dare this female mock them? How dare she?

Digger reached the roof first. And just like this it was over. One second, the girl was several meters away, looking bored. A moment later, she had drawn her sword and cut off his forelimbs in a flash of silver. His pack-brother writhed in pain and fell down the street. He grimaced in anger. This was not a fatal wound, but it was close...

Before he had the time to stop Hunger from making the same mistake, the favourite card-partner of Digger was upon her, spitting in hate. But just like a snake, suddenly the girl was no longer there. The strike of the thirty years-old wererat hit only empty air...and from nowhere the girl and her sword attacked again, cleaving Hunger’s neck neatly in two. The headless corpse fell from the roof, followed an instant later by the head of his claw-warrior.

“Feel answering some questions, wererat?”

“I will kill you, witch.” Because that was what the human was. She didn’t wear the robes of the hated wand-wielders and did not fight like them, but teleportation was the mark of wizards and witches. “My rodere will track you, rape you, and eat your corpse. You will beg for death and I will personally send your skull to your parents.”

Just after he said this, there were more gunshots in the distance, followed by more rat screams of pain. And to his consternation, Digger’s body contorted a few more times on the ground before lying still.

“Your friends are busy dying,” said the green-eyed bitch, cleaning the blood from her sword on Hunger’s head. “Telling me the information I seek may save one or two.”

 Bloody Ear answered with an insult and spat on the ground. “Your kind killed my claw-brothers during the war. I am going to-“

New gunshots echoed in the distance, dying screams came to his ears and then silence came back.

“Ahem.” And suddenly Patient Hunter had a sword under his throat. Another damned wand wielder had come from nowhere, this one was red-haired and blue-eyed. The blade she held appeared ancient and covered in yellow-flashing inscriptions.

“It is your last chance,” informed them the second teenage girl. “You have attacked us without provocation, nobody will cry if I kill you here and now with *Claimh Solais*.” The sword was pushed further against Patient Hunter’s throat, slightly injuring him and drawing a drop or two of blood. “What do you say?”

“We will never bow to wand-wielders again,” he snarled, taking his reserve of Rat’s Surge in his right pocket and drinking it in one gulp. He prepared to jump...

And he found himself facing the first girl, her sword in his stomach. Bloody Ear screamed as agony coursed through his body. From the corner of his left eye, he saw the head of his old comrade roll on the ground.

“You should not have told me you were going to rape me, wererat.” So much pain, but the voice sounded like the one of their former King, icy and commanding.

His transformation had begun, but whatever this cursed sword was, it was preventing his healing abilities from acting correctly. His legs and his arms were not answering anymore. He raised his eyes, trying to ignore how much blood was flowing from his wounds and froze.

He saw the gates of hell, thousands of crows waiting for him on the other side. He saw the village and the world around him convulse into a green hell. He saw a dark figure waiting for him.

“Monster...” He managed to articulate. And then he took his last breath and screamed forever more.

**12 June 1993, Village of Rashtam, England**

“What were these imbeciles thinking?” Alexandra knew she shouldn’t shout like this in a place where so many people had died, it was not exactly respectful to the dead. But then the brief fight had left her absolutely furious and she really needed to unleash some of the anger she felt.

“We had them dead to rights, Morag!”

“I know...” replied her friend, who looked like she was going to vomit for the second time that day – the first had been after decapitating the last wererat.

The rest of the Dudley’s gang had retreated several meters away as she had started her grumbling, preferring to verify if their silver bullets had not missed their enemies rather than face her wrath.

Alexandra shouted a few insults at the corpses of the last skinchangers before sighing in defeat and sitting on one of the rare benches the wererats had not destroyed during their occupation of the village.

“Sorry, I should not have shouted like that.”

“Don’t worry, I understand.” The Irish Heiress took a bottle of water out of her bottomless bag and began drinking it. “Your plan was good and I approved it because it gave us a chance to speak to them calmly and avoid any violence. It’s not your fault these were-animals were just interested in killing and eating us.”

The young witch closed her eyes in regret, Morag made a good point as always, and yet...

“I still must control my temper...else our minions are going to run away quick every time something turns wrong.”

At first she had believed fear was the way to keep the Dudley’s gang in line, but after a few days and seeing them like this, scared and leaderless...in hindsight it was perhaps not her best idea.

And this little enterprise had begun so well. With a few of Dudley’s hairs they had been able to recover, locking a tracking Charm on his whereabouts had not been difficult. They had rapidly prepared a few odourless flower-based Potions at MacDougal Manor, transfigured thousand of miniature rocks into silver bullets – she was ready to bet McGonagall had never thought of that when she taught them their first practical lesson. The rest had been done by Piers and his friends: Jimmy had found several hunting guns and pistols for their little expedition – and neither Alexandra nor the others had asked where and how. Malcolm had found an old car, various alibis had been forged for a week of absence and food had been purchased.

They had rapidly found the abandoned village of Rashtam, which was conveniently in the middle of nowhere. They had observed the wererats for a few hours, planning their strategy and anti-were tactics as best as they could. They only wanted to talk and discover Dudley’s whereabouts after all.

Alexandra had certainly not anticipated the wererats being stupid enough to charge a wall of gunfire when a single bullet could end their life. Nor that the morons in rat-skin would choose to fight and die to the last when it was evident they hadn’t a single chance against her, never mind the rest of the group.

When compared to the ‘tactics’ of certain anonymous Gryffindors and Slytherins at school, the wererats actions were utterly moronic and worthy of an animal like the lemming. ‘Charge blindly against the enemy and repeat until your side or the other is dead’ sounded brilliant in a third-rate movie, but in the real world, it was completely stupid.

“This operation was a disaster.” There was no other word to describe this fiasco. “We didn’t find Dudley, we have the confirmation that the wererats prefer to die rather than talk with a witch, an entire village of two hundred people was eaten by these monsters, and we have no idea where the rest of their pack has departed.”

“Don’t forget the fact that the wererats have a sort of Alchemic substance allowing them to transform without waiting for the full moon,” added Morag. “One of the biggest advantages our Aurors had was the impossibility of the skinchangers to transform except on the nights of the full moon. If it isn’t longer true...”

The Potter Heiress put Fragarach back into its scabbard, trying to figure out how such a thing was possible. Unfortunately, Alchemy was a very advanced class and their oh-so-wise Headmaster had never judged useful to hire a teacher for it. It went without saying that with how little time the Chief Warlock spent at Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore was not going to do it himself.

“This is a major innovation,” she agreed. “There are no more renowned Alchemists in England except Dumbledore, so I presume this substance was bought on the continent.”

“It must have been pretty expensive,” said the red-haired Ravenclaw. “Since we managed to discover the dozen of big vials they had left, I think we will be able to ask a few questions here and there.”

 “Yeah, and what will we do when we meet the mad genius who created this drug?” Because considering how aggressive and rat-looking these men had become, the term ‘drug’ was really accurate. They were addicted, ready to transform for the most futile reasons – one of the idiots had transformed when they were doing their reconnaissance – and their dangerousness increased exponentially. “Assuming he doesn’t try to kill us for discovering his secret, the drug itself isn’t exactly illegal at the moment.”

“Because the Ministry and the Wizengamot have no idea it exists.” Her friend replied. “The moment Fudge and Dumbledore knows of its existence, it will be forbidden before you can say ‘Quidditch’.”

The raven-haired Potter grimaced.

“Voting a new law to forbid this substance is all well and good, but please tell me if I’m wrong: is there not a law that forces the wererats to live in Ministry-held reserves like the werewolves?”

“Yeah, but it was never strictly enforced, according to my father...” Morag’s eyes widened at the end of her sentence. “I see your point. They have already violated countless laws and the Ministry didn’t stop them. Why should they care about one more, especially when the drug gives them a chance to fight back against the wizards?”

Alexandra nodded darkly.

“It’s difficult to put yourself in the heads of these were-animals, but I think that’s how they will see it.”

She watched the vans and the cars, gathered here, the ruined central plaza of the village with its wrecked World War I memorial. The wererats had built a new army there, one to avenge their losses of the last civil war. And the Ministry in its massive incompetence had not noticed anything. For the last months, it had been a village where less than three hundred people must have lived. But tomorrow and the days after that?

“We can’t do anything more than we have,” the green-eyed girl sighed. “I don’t think the wererats will come back to this place anyway now that we’ve killed their friends. Gather the gang, we are going to leave.”

“Do you intend to let them keep their memories?” Morag asked. “Until today what they’d seen was fairly normal, but letting them fight the wererats is a major breach of the Statute of Secrecy...”

A chuckle came out of Alexandra’s mouth.

“I could tell you it’s the wererats own fault for not respecting the law and violating every rule of decency...but I won’t. The Statute of Secrecy can go hang for all I care: judging by the excellent job the Ministry is doing, it is going to die in the next few years no matter what I do. You disagree?”

“Not exactly,” answered Morag with a small pout. “I just don’t like this situation a lot. They proved reliable, but they aren’t our friends or anything like that...”

“Well, consider this: if we remove their memories properly – and we would have to hire a professional because none of our group has the Obliviation skills necessary for the task – they will miss Dudley and are going to ask questions. As long as we’re around it won’t be a problem, but we won’t be able to intervene once we go back to Hogwarts in September...”

“I see your point.” Morag didn’t say she was happy with it, but it was fine. It was better to know she was taking risks than having someone kiss her feet, clean the floor where she walked and ignore the problems until they were too big to be solved. “I see your point,” she repeated as the six boys of Dudley’s gang stood before them.

“No trace of Dudley,” reported Dennis Roberts.

“And I fear we will not find one,” Alexandra figured it was useless to lie to them now. “There are only two scenarios left to us now that my Tracking Charm guided us here: either Dudley was eaten by the wererats or he was transformed into one of them. Either way, I can’t locate him magically anymore.”

“So it is over, right?” Piers looked to be the one who was taking the news the hardest.

“Nothing is really over, but until we know where all the rest of the wererats have gone, we can’t do anything.” Alexandra observed the six boys. On their faces, the feelings of fear, triumph, and excitement of the last few hours had turned into dejection and disappointment. They had acted, but it was far too late for their leader. “Morag and I are going to give you methods to communicate with us should something change.”

“What do we do with the village?” asked Malcolm. “We can’t leave dead wererats in the middle of the street, Alexandra.”

If there was a good point about this little incident, it was that Dudley’s gang was far more respectful about what she could do. It was almost funny how killing three wererats with just a sword and a basic series of Apparitions had boosted her image.

“We will burn them with most of the vans and the cars we don’t take with us.” She decided. Despite her personal violations of the Statute of Secrecy, it was better not to leave pig-sized rats in evidence for the next hunters or lost travellers to find this village. “In fact, we are going to burn everything giving outsiders a clue of what happened here.”

“Do we leave a message?” said Edgar Dalton. The boy had emptied the totality of his silver bullets in the diverse wererat corpses and now a thin smile was coming back on his rugged face.

Alexandra took a moment to think about it. On the one hand, keeping it anonymous would be a nice advantage if they needed to do something to a new wererat secret hideout. On the other hand, a false lead could divert the attention that would be directed their way once they figured out Dudley was one of the victims. Decisions, decisions...she turned towards Morag, but her friend simply shrugged.

“Yes, it looks like the paint you brought with you may be useful after all. Choose a fictional organisation of supervillains that does not have ‘Exiled’ or ‘Army’ in its name and prepare a message on the wall of this big house...”

**13 June 1993, Village of Rashtam, England**

Artemis Cassius left her black Mercedes in a very angry mood. She had a lot of responsibilities this week in Valerian’s absence, and travelling to a lost village in the forests of Northern England was not one of those. She could not even try the Jaguar her husband had offered her as a present. The car was too remarkable and was not adapted at all for the tight and sinuous roads leading to this tiny and unimportant village.

Thus yes, the High Sentinel of the Soul Drinkers was not smiling and laughing as she slammed the door of her vehicle shut and advanced on the road leading to the ruins which had once been called Rashtam.

The fires had all been extinguished several hours ago when her troops had ‘hired’ several Muggle firemen for the job, but her senses were almost overwhelmed by the odour of burnt metal and flesh. Artemis had smelled far worse in the ancient days, but this night she was in no mood to appreciate it.

The walk in the main street did not give her any reason to rejoice. Everywhere the traces of neglect and fire were visible. What the wererats had done since they had taken the village for themselves had been bad. The fire which had ravaged the place yesterday had finished the process of destruction.

Externally, she was the perfect representation of grace and discipline in her black clothes and boots. Internally, Artemis was boiling. Could these imbeciles of wererats and Shadow Blades ever do something right in their lives? The coven of the Soul Drinkers had helped them create this base away from the prying eyes of wizards and other interested parties in exchange for an impressive amount of precious metals and the support of their continental benefactors. Thank the Holy Blood, the rodere had left for the continent days ago. As bad as this situation was, this was nothing on the scale a general massacre of wererats would have done.

“Felix, report,” She commanded her second. The huge blonde-haired vampire had just emerged from a nearby house. His working clothes were covered in ashes and he had a grim expression.

“All the wererats who were left behind to guard the village are dead. The vehicles they bought, stole or were loaned are destroyed or missing. We can’t be sure given the level of destruction, but it looks like the last reserves of Rat’s Surge they did not drink were stolen.”

A loud crash echoed in the distance, and both vampires saw a house collapse like its foundations had suddenly turned to straw.

“How many of the vermin were garrisoned there?” She saw no reason to not show her contempt for the wererats. Unlike the wereleopards allied with the Soul Drinkers, these were-animals had proved useless in the last war the vampire-skinchanger alliance had waged against the wand-wielders, following the Shadow Blades in every stupid plan and only winning when they covered the battlefield in a carpet of their own dead.

“They left between nine and twelve of their warriors here. It included a mix of lone old warriors and promising new fighters.”

Felix and she walked down the main street of Rashtam, discovering more wild destruction caused by the wererats. In all honesty, it was mind-boggling. The wererats had been granted a sanctuary for several months here, but they had literally vandalised and pulverised it at every opportunity. Several houses which had partially escaped the flames were so dilapidated the High Sentinel was half-convinced the flames had partially hidden the structural problems, not worsened them.

“What is your opinion on the opposition they faced?” Artemis asked as they stopped before a building which once upon a time must have been the bakery of the village. Untouched by the fire, this one looked like the walls had been used as a scratch post for the transforming wererats. Inside, the ovens looked like a few hundred people had used them as punching-balls before dragging them half-way to the door and abandoning them there. It was further proof of their low levels of intelligence. Instead of assigning one of their own to provide bread every morning, the allies of the Shadow Blades – or maybe butlers and lackeys was more accurate – had without doubt eaten the baker and sacked the place afterwards when they failed to understand how it worked.

And the wererats wondered why the Soul Drinkers didn’t take them seriously when they boasted of being able to conquer the British Isles.

“At first, my team was thinking it was the job of a highly professional mercenary group with a deep grudge against the wererats. The silver bullets, the killing ground they used outside the village, and the fact someone placed a sniper on the roofs were signs in this direction.”

Artemis nodded, but it was the past tense which worried her.

“But then we studied the bullets and guess what?” In his large hand, the tiny projectile was not looking silvery at all.

“These are not silver bullets,” commented Artemis, recognising the centuries-old stratagem of every were-hunter worth the name. “They are lead objects someone transfigured into silver and which took back their initial form after a day and a half.”

And since transfiguration was a magical skill reserved to one species and one species alone, the party responsible for the final destruction of Rashtam had somehow included a wand-wielder human. This was outright disastrous.

“I suppose we have no clues who was responsible for this massacre?”

“They really did a thorough job cleaning the place,” replied unhappily Felix. “The bullets they left behind were already difficult to find and the corpses are so badly burned we can’t say anything with confidence. There’s only a message on the wall...”

“What sort of message?”

Her second didn’t answer immediately, instead walking further east. In the middle of the night, the noises were limited to the Soul Drinkers searching the ruins. The local animals must have fled the place long ago, the presence of the wererats discouraging any sort of food-gathering in a circle of a dozen of miles.

It took less than a minute to arrive in front of a place which must have been a bar or fulfilling a similar drinking function. Unlike other houses, it was clear the perpetrators had voluntarily chosen not to torch the place.

Painted in large green letters on the wall, the message was short, clear and to the point.

**THE ONLY GOOD RAT IS A DEAD RAT**

**HAIL HYDRA**

“And here I thought the wizards abhorred the ‘Muggle culture’...” Artemis said with a smirk.

“They may have assistants or advisors from a non-magical background.” Felix pointed out. “The use of guns is hardly typical of their Ministry or any of their terrorist groups.”

“Well, continue your investigation.” The High Sentinel ordered. “I don’t think I will get the authorisation to demand explanations from the wizard’s authorities, but the suppliers of the Rat’s Surge are not going to be happy the secret may be out.”

“We are not responsible for this!” Felix exclaimed. “We have just six Daylight Rings in the coven and we aren’t going to use them to babysit the wererats!”

“I know it and you know it. But someone is going to pay for this incident and I don’t think we want to be on the Exchequer’s black list...”

**29 June 1993, Tara, Ireland**

The magical village of Tara, five miles south of the famous Hill of Tara, was a very nice place to live. In some ways, it reminded Alexandra of the Shire Tolkien had described in his books. It was green and prosperous, full of joy and laughter. It was at the same time more and less organised than Diagon Alley. It was a far more magical location, every wizard and witch could feel it as a Ley line was coursing under it. There were of course no hobbits, but one thousand-plus inhabitants of magical Tara –roughly half of the population - were farfadets and their dwellings had common points with the fictional hobbit habitations. A small stone wall was surrounding the village and a tower was in the middle of it – according to the local wizards and witches, you could see the Stone of Destiny from the top.

After their recent adventures at the month’s start, it was a little corner of paradise on earth.

“You didn’t tell me why you wanted to come here today, Morag.”

At the moment the two of them were sitting on wooden chairs in the middle of a small but animated restaurant. They had not yet ordered what they wanted to eat; Alexandra guessed the reason was the empty third chair to her right.

“It’s a surprise,” sing-sang the MacDougal Heiress for the third time today.

“Well, I hope your surprise has not forgotten to come.” A farfadet waiter rushed to a table full of boisterous members of his own species, carrying a huge tray where dozens of large beer mugs were waiting to be drunk. “I am quite hungry and I want to taste this farfadet’s cooking. It smells delicious.”

 “How you can eat so much and remain that slim...” Her friend didn’t finish the sentence.

“Well, I am doing my jogging twice per week,” she reminded Morag. “And I’m flying twice per week too now. Four days of tiring physical exercise per week, and we’re walking the afternoon the three other days. I am not going to be fat and plump.”

The diverse Nutrition Potions she was getting were apparently doing their job. This year she had not spent a single day at the Dursleys. According to the Medi-Witch who had come to MacDougal Manor, the succession of Hogwarts’ large meals and the Houses Elves’ service at her friend’s home was good for her health. For sure, she was getting taller and had almost caught up with Morag in height. On the one hand, she was not going to be mistaken for a tiny first-year anymore. On the other hand, she was going to need a complete change of wardrobe in the months to come and she had a feeling her growth spurt was far from over.

In the days where they weren’t doing their summer homework, learning how to swim or to speak Gaelic, the two witches had already bought some clothes from nearby clothes shops.

“Don’t worry, Alex. With a body like yours, you will never be fat,” It would have been better if Morag had not chosen to wiggle at the same time. Alexandra gave her a not-so-convinced expression, because the truth was that her red-haired friend was not fat at all...true she was slimmer than her but Morag had exercised enough on brooms to be considered ‘athletic’. And greatest of injustices, Morag was not flat at all like her. Her Irish friend was taller by a few hairs, but in the breasts and backside contest, well...Alexandra was honest enough to admit she was losing by a large margin.

“Yeah, yeah laugh...I’m going to jinx you with a new spell next time we duel.” You had to admit, the restrictions of underage magic were bad until you were protected by the wards of an ancestral manor. After that, the only magic restrictions were not to do it in front of Ministry officials.

“Another time, perhaps,” said Morag, turning her head as the small door of the restaurant opened for the first time in five minutes. “Oh, it looks like my surprise has arrived.”

Alexandra watched the person who had just entered. Given how tall the newcomer was, he or she was not a farfadet. As the door closed and the brightness of the sun stopped troubling her eyes, Alexandra could see the person they had been waiting for was indeed a she. The witch had to be in her early twenties – though as always it was difficult to say with magical people and the illusions at their disposition – she had short red hair and definitely the body of someone doing a lot of physical activity, given the muscles a green T-shirt did nothing to hide.

At first, Alexandra believed the young woman was one of Morag’s numerous cousins – but while she had the hairs for it, her visage and her eyes were different. Plus she had never seen her at MacDougal Manor or in one of the surrounding villages. And yet there was something familiar, like she had seen the woman before in a photo or something...

Morag stood up to hug the witch and by the strength the muscular witch put in the embrace, she had a feeling the Irish Heiress had just had her ribs protest loudly.

“Thanks for coming, Erin,” the red-haired Ravenclaw managed to utter.

“Hey, I don’t think Lord MacDougal would be very happy with me if I refused your invitation,” the smile of her interlocutor was wide.

Morag chuckled, before shifting her attention to Alexandra.

“Alex, meet Erin Moran. She is-“

“The second Chaser of the Irish National Quidditch team,” she finished. Yes, once she had a name she remembered where she had seen the witch before. The *Dancing Farfadet* had published several photos of Moran and her team in the last months.

“And you’re Alexandra Potter,” the dark brown eyes were not especially catchy, but there was a formidable will behind them. In a few seconds, Alexandra estimated Erin Moran was probably not a powerful witch, but she would use every inch of power she had in her body to browbeat an opponent into submission. “The legendary Basilisk-Slayer of Hogwarts. There were a lot of rumours spreading about you while we were training in Africa.”

Alexandra shook the hand the professional Quidditch player offered her, trying not to wince at the powerful grip and finally the three witches sat. The waiter arrived and left with their meal choices, leaving them alone to talk.

“I didn’t know House MacDougal was supporting the Irish team.” Alexandra commented. “You know, more than every Irish witch and wizard.”

“Oh, they don’t,” said absently Erin Moran. “They supported me personally when I began my professional career.”

“And so far father is really happy how it turned out,” Morag smirked in a way which told her there was a ‘but’ coming soon. “Or rather he was before last month when he and most of the Irish Houses were told how much it was going to cost them to win the World Cup.”

Alexandra frowned. Quidditch referees took great pride in their incorruptibility – they had to, otherwise the supporters of either playing team would tear them apart in a few minutes. Seeing her uncomprehending look, Erin chuckled.

“The news hasn’t filtered outside the pro teams and some of the big broom-maker companies, but there’s a new elite broom which is about to hit the market next month.” The red-haired player shrugged. “It’s the result of a decade of research from a French-Italian-American trio of Enchanters. According to the few tests which have been given to us, this broom is going to massacre every other existing model in Europe.”

Alexandra raised her eyebrows in an unconvinced expression.

“The *Daily Prophet* was pretending the same thing about the Nimbus 2001 last year and look at the result.” She could not stop a grin from forming on her lips. Sure, Nimbus had momentarily earned a lot of gold, but by December their sales were in free fall and according to Morag, not a single ‘world-class broom’ had been sold since February. It was simply too expensive for its mediocre performances. Professional Quidditch players of Britain preferred the Nimbus 2000, who while inferior in speed wasn’t going to send you against the stands when you braked too suddenly.

“In other circumstances, I would say the same, but this time our manager was invited to a conference and it looked like the real deal.” A light of eagerness was in Moran’s eyes. “From zero to one hundred and fifty miles per hour in ten seconds,” she recited like an advertisement speech, “an aerodynamic perfection giving it a sixty-four percent advantage over the Nimbus 2000, an unbreakable Braking Charm and a trajectory precision never seen before. The price tag is of 8,345 Galleons.”

Alexandra was glad she was not drinking something when she heard the sum, because she sure as hell would have spit out everything. More than eight thousand Galleons? This was completely insane! With a sum like that, you could usually buy brooms for an entire professional team, not one. The Nimbus 2001 had cost 1,400-plus Galleons during the first months, and it had rapidly fallen as the new product proved calamitous.

“Have they built brooms from gold and platinum for a price like this?” The Potter Heiress tried to not burst into laughter and failed miserably.

“I admit it’s a bit pricey,” Erin Moran admitted and Morag scoffed loudly, “but if it’s really the world-class broom we’ve been promised for years, then we will have no choice but to find sponsors to ask for them. A good broom does not replace teamwork and skill, but if we don’t have them and our opponents do, we have no chance in the qualifying rounds, never mind the finals.”

“And this is why we have two free tickets in the lodges tonight at Clover Stadium,” said Morag in a triumphant voice. The Chaser looked at her friend with a mix of exasperation and fondness. Obviously, the two of them had already met several times in the past. “Tonight, Ireland versus Greece, first qualifying match of Group C.”

“Cool!” She exclaimed before turning her attention to the delicious smell of their meals arriving with the farfadet waiter. “What is the name of this new broom anyway?”

“The French will commercialise it under the name *Eclair-de-feu*,” answered Erin. “But in English-speaking countries, it will be known as the *Firebolt*.”

**29 June 1993, Aberdeen, Scotland**

Three vampires, five wererats and a wizard entered a bar.

It looked like the beginning of a very amusing joke.

It wasn’t one.

First, the bar which had been chosen for the reunion had been maintained as a safehouse since at least a decade ago, and if a non-invited person tried to pass the door of the *Glorious Nights*, he or she would quickly realise the place was closed and had been this way for a long time. A few chairs and three tables were left, but the state of abandonment on the ground floor was striking. Not surprising, because the wererats who had bought this place had hidden the important things on the first floor and let the years do the rest. Like many places the vampires of the Shadow Blades and the rodere of the wererats owned, the first and only rule was that no wizard, competent or not, could say for sure the bar belonged to a magical species.

Secondly, the beings meeting tonight were quite high-ranked in their respective organisations. The five wererats were Piercing Fang, Diseased Claw, Blood Hunter, Shadow Tracker and Swift Paw. All were survivors of the last war which had almost extinguished their species on British soil. They had not the power to claim the Kingship – all the potential Heirs were rather unavailable at the moment. The three vampires were Coven Elder Tiberius Calpurnius, his wife Agnes and a mountain of muscles which had presented himself as Brutus.

The contrast was quite striking between the two species, and a reminder that no matter their long alliance with each other, the rats and the vampires were independent factions which had each waged war against the Ministry of Magic for their own reasons. Granted, the fact the Ministry was placing all the ‘Dark Creatures’ in the same category when it voted legislation against them had probably helped.

The wererats’ leaders were rather dirty and wore tattered clothes. Their traits were all harbouring the signs of alterations from the curse flowing in their veins. The noses looked like muzzles. The teeth were far too big and sharpened. It should not have been that way. Most of the wererats hid their true nature in the Muggle population when they were not transformed. In theory, it should have made them able to disguise themselves better. But in the last months, they had decided to use this new Alchemic drug, the one they had unoriginally named Rat’s Surge, to improve their cohesion and their fighting prowess. On the good side, the wererats were now a redoubtable fighting force. On the bad side, they had the appearance of rat-man hybrids and their money reserves weren’t able to provide them decent trousers anymore.

Opposite to them, the vampires looked like members of the upper aristocracy. Agnes Calpurnius had chosen a very expensive green dress for tonight, and Tiberius was wearing a distinguished green suit. Even the bodyguard-built Brutus had come with a black suit, though the attire must have been custom-sized given the width of his shoulders and his massive body. They were pale, flawless, and as they observed their allies, they had the immobility of statues. Peter wasn’t fooled. In a mere second, vampires could pass from this passive stance to an extremely aggressive one.

Needless to say, as the most fragile member of this assembly and the wizard who was seated between the wererats and the vampires, the fourth Marauder was feeling a bit nervous. In the dozen reunions that had taken place in 1993, about half had ended in violence. He was an Animagus and thus unable to be changed into a were-being or a vampire, but it would not protect him if someone decided to slice open his throat and spill his intestines on the ground.

“Since we are all here and the posturing is done, I suppose we can begin,” said Tiberius Calpurnius. As usual, the powerful vampire was speaking in a bored tone. It was impossible to say if it was really his mood – after centuries a lot of things had to lose their attractiveness – or it was a way to impose his will over the assembly. It may be for another reason, but Peter hadn’t managed to discover it.

Brutus unrolled a map on the main table, which had just been cleaned for the session. Unlike the Marauder Map or another of the maps he had had the opportunity to create in his life, Peter saw this large one was completely lifeless, devoid of any Blood Runes the vampires loved to engrave on their priceless documents. It was of mediocre manufacturing, detailing the outer defences of a fortress. There were also a lot of blanks. The title in big black letters easily explained why.

**PRISON OF AZKABAN**

“I would have preferred to have more information,” grumbled Swift Paw.

“So do I,” agreed Peter Pettigrew. “But the plans of the prison are one of the most secure things the DMLE is guarding. Moreover, stealing them and getting caught would alert the entire Ministry and their procedures would be completely overturned for the next few months. Count the months of late autumn, winter and early spring during which our target is plagued by ice storms and awful weather, and we would have to wait until next year.”

“We can’t wait that long,” growled Diseased Claw. “Our brothers at Azkaban are dying as we speak. We must rescue them!”

Peter Pettigrew’s visage stayed immobile and he nodded politely at the declaration of the big wererat. Deep inside unfortunately, he knew the hopes of Diseased Claw were going to be cruelly shattered. Assuming they managed to break through Azkaban defences – and despite their preparations it was far from a sure thing – the wererats imprisoned inside had been subjected to Dementor exposure for nearly twelve years. Sure, Dementors had more difficulty breaking the mental defences of skinchangers. By all means, their fur when they transformed gave them an advantage to endure the terrible Azkaban winters. But they were not immune to these mental and physical tortures and the one hundred-plus wererats had never received Occlumency training or enchanted artefacts to survive this last decade.

“We have a date ready for approval,” added Piercing Fang in a calmer rasp. “The third of August once the sun sets.”

The three vampires stayed silent for quite a few seconds, before Tiberius answered curtly.

“I approve.” If the Coven Elder felt anger or other negative feelings at the idea of having his hands forced by a wererat timetable, he showed no sign of it. “We should have three hundred newborn vampires to storm Azkaban by this date.”

“We will have nearly a thousand new recruits by this date for the operation,” bragged Blood Hunter. Peter wondered if the wererat had not had his mind ravaged by the too frequent animal transformations the new Alchemic drug allowed. He and the vampires had insisted that the attack on Azkaban was to use vampires and rats that could be easily sacrificed. The newborn vampires and the recently cursed wererats were to be the core of this completely expendable force.

But since the Animagus rather doubted they had managed to kidnap a few thousand Muggles and ensure at least a thousand survived their first full moon, it meant the rodere was going to participate with some of their veterans...just like they had been warned not to. Bah, if the Shadow Blades did not voice their opposition, why should he?

“I have hired a hundred and twenty mercenaries from the Balkans,” he announced as the pair of eyes turned towards him. “They’re far from elite wizards and witches, but they will stay loyal as long as you pay them.”

“How many can use a Patronus or an Ecclesial?” demanded Agnes Calpurnius, her mouth briefly opening to reveal her predatory fangs.

“Today, forty-five were able to cast one or the other under pressure.” And what a pain it was to train them. Most of these mercenaries had gone to ‘the Balkan school’, a contemptuous name for a year or two of poor magical education. It was all the training teenagers got before being thrown into one of the multiple small wars perpetually raging for the last two centuries in the war-torn region. “I think between ten and twenty more will have mastered the spells by the deadline.”

“This is not exactly encouraging,” snorted the Vampire woman. “The Azkaban garrison has twenty Aurors and fifty warden-guards of variable skill, and they will be on the defensive.”

There was no need to say why, unless you were an idiot. Once the attack was on its way, the Dementors were going to temporarily abandon their guard over the prisoners and darken the skies around the prison. An attack upon their lair and their food source was not something they could ignore.

“We have no choice,” grumbled Diseased Claw. “The three ships we will use to transport our army to the island have all been prepared and I don’t think even a Vampire Coven will be able to convince the British government to loan us a hundred helicopters for an illegal operation against their magical counterparts.”

“Almost certainly not,” confirmed Tiberius and for the first time there was something like a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Then we will use the rotations of the patrols, the night’s beginning and the element of surprise to our advantage,” said Swift Paw. “We land on the beach near the Graveyard, we use the mercenaries to give us a minute or two against the Dementors, and we use the respite to breach the prison walls. Our brothers and sisters will be liberated, you use the Keys of Boreas to free Lord Victor, and we leave this horrid place for good.”

Said like this, it was almost a reasonable plan...for a wererat who had never seen a Dementor once in his life. Peter was ready to bet it was going to change once they saw the soul-sucking demons. One way or another, it was going to be a massacre.

The debate didn’t end there but the talks afterwards were of minor importance, small logistic and transport issues which had not been resolved prior to this reunion. The greatest attempt to break prisoners out of Azkaban, Operation Alcatraz, was about to begin.

**29 June 1993, Nurmengard, somewhere in the Baltic Sea**

The fortress of Nurmengard was a dreary place.

The walls were perpetually surrounded by violent cold rains, a dense fog or important snow falls.

The temperature was rarely above zero degrees Celsius.

According to the experts of this field, even arctic animals and birds in general fled towards lands and skies more clement.

From a distance of a few kilometres, the citadel-prison appeared deserted.

This impression was false.

While those in the know debated between themselves if ghosts seeking vengeance could count as beings, there were still a few house elves to maintain order in the place.

The Ministries of Magic who alternated their turn to guard the place had, after 1945, tried to sell this duty to their own reservist magical forces and the rare Muggles aware of the Wizarding World. After several hundred deaths, the idea had been abandoned.

Nurmengard was no ordinary prison. Its walls were impregnated with a ward-curse so ancient and so powerful the Roman wizards having invented it erased all traces of its existence before burying its secrets in the darkest and deepest hole they had. For a centuries-old Empire who had had absolutely no qualms in bashing thousands of barbarian heads and pursuing rituals which could be best described as ‘bloody’, this was saying something. In time, even the toughest and battle-hardened veterans learned to shiver when the name of the ward-curse was uttered: *Noctis Labyrinthus*.

When Berlin fell to the Red Army in 1945 and the last fanatic supporters of the Dark Lord Grindelwald were massacred in a bloody last stand, the gates of Nurmengard had been opened by an international task force of the ICW. What they had found had driven many war veterans to suicide. A large proportion of the prisoners had been mercy-killed minutes after their ‘liberation’, the devices keeping them alive being properly inhumane.

Nurmengard had become the very symbol of what fate awaited you should a wizard or a witch dare to oppose Gellert Grindelwald and his butchers. The core of these assassins and mass-murderers were rotting on diverse battlefields, but there were still several dozen dark wizards having been captured and awaiting their judgement. Ordinary cells would not be enough against these madmen.

The solution therefore imposed itself in the minds of the victorious magical armies. The humans, quickly followed by every magical species of note having participated in the war, supported the imprisonment of the defeated Dark Lord and his supporters inside the very walls they had built in Dark Magic, atrocities, and arrogance.

Nurmengard had been conceived to adapt to the prisoners’ levels of resistance, the elements and the demented will of dark wizards. Plenty of famous mages and ward-masters had died testing its defences and verifying this truth. After a short debate, it was decided Nurmengard was going to be the tomb of Grindelwald’s army.

In the March of 1946, five hundred and twenty-nine wizards and witches were imprisoned in the infamous prison. Over three hundred men and a bit less than two hundred women marched to the very hell they had consecrated in the blood of innocents and the courageous souls having fought to their last breath against them.

The screams were so loud in intensity the defence force was ready to testify it was possible to hear them from the German coast, despite the considerable number of nautical miles separating Nurmengard from the continent.

The officers and soldiers of the most powerful dark army having ravaged Europe had screamed and died in long and painful agonies.

One by one, they fell silent. The curses cementing the fortifications and defences, the escape attempts and the cold weather reaped an awful death toll. Wizards had an excellent immunity system and the power coursing in their veins was able to fight the cold conditions and keep the wand-wielders alive far longer than what should be scientifically possible.

But everything in the world had its limits, and the constitution of a wizard or a witch was no exception to this rule. House Elves were not immune to the lethal defences and traps, which meant sometimes the meals were given once or twice a week. The warming charms rarely raised the temperature of the corridors to a comfortable level. The very nightmares ensorcelled to fuel the insane depravities of Dark Wizards were turned against their creators’ weakened bodies and minds.

The elite wand-wielders who had led the SS and the Nazi leaders in their various extermination campaigns were now dropping like flies. In 1950, the number of prisoners had decreased to one hundred and seventy-nine. In 1958, the inmate population passed under fifty. In 1965, there were less than ten humans alive sitting in their cells.

By 1981 and the apparent defeat of Lord Voldemort at the hands of Neville Longbottom the Boy-Who-Lived, there was only one man left imprisoned in the sinister fortress-prison of Nurmengard.

The talks at the International Confederation of Wizards to close the cursed place grew year after year.

Sadly, no human government was immune to delays, petty disputes, and conflicts of interests. And the ICW for all its virtues harboured a lot of said problems. Five different magical nations had advanced their claims for the island where Nurmengard had been built. Settling the matter was going to take time, and the matter was not settled by 1993. In reality, the delegates of this international magical assembly knew the preliminaries had barely been negotiated. There was a new Supreme Mugwump to elect and many debates raged on this subject rather than the ownership of Nurmengard.

The last prisoner enduring the violence of the elements from the dark walls of his cell knew nothing of these talks. But had he been made aware of them, his most likely answer would have been a fatalistic shrug. Nurmengard had a way to kill everyone’s happiness.

Despite the late hour on this night in June, the prisoner was not sleeping. Not by a lack of wanting, but there was a persistent cold wind lowering the temperature of his cell and resonating loudly in the deserted corridors. These were not good conditions to sleep in, though the prisoner could have if he had made more of an effort. But there was nothing to do in Nurmengard, and so the prisoner waited, reciting an old lesson of Transfiguration he had assisted with once century ago.

The change came, not in a storm, but in a shiver against his skin.

The prisoner raised his head brusquely.

Someone was using Fel Magic close by. He recognised the aura and there was no way he could be wrong. The Dark-tuned ability to tap into the Ley Lines of the planet could hardly be mistaken for something else.

The power in the distance grew minute after minute and the prisoner took refuge in the least exposed corner of his cell. Whatever the being using Fel Magic planned, it was going to be big. He had not experienced such concentration of power since the Fall of Berlin.

The magical attack struck like a mega-sized Bombardment Charm. One second, everything was silent. The next, hundreds of magical alarms screamed to signal a breach in the defences. The prisoner heard the fury of the elements raging, the stone crumbling, and entire sections of the prison collapsing.

If it had been a normal prison, wardens and other security forces would start running to their posts by now. But there was no one in Nurmengard to defend it, though he didn’t doubt the forces of several Magical Ministries were called and mustered right now. They would probably be too late, however.

More alarms screamed and the familiar sound of collapsing defences continued. Nurmengard was supposed to be an impregnable fortress, but the attackers evidently were aware of the properties of the *Noctis Labyrinthus*. By the sounds of it, they were tearing the place apart and were demolishing everything against them with the finesse of a battering ram. The prisoner approved. Nurmengard was not something you could attack and emerge alive if you were trying to be spare with your power and your skills. From the window, the prisoner saw a wall three levels lower than his cell collapse in an inferno of black flames.

About half a minute later, he was able to hear the first footsteps. They rapidly grew closer and then the voice seemingly came from the very darkness.

“I told you these wards were far too much a dozen times. A good prison is one its creator can escape if he really needs to.”

The prisoner said nothing and didn’t move a muscle to acknowledge he had heard the declaration. His only visible reaction was a small narrowing of his eyes. Given his past, he himself had taunted more than a hundred times many of his enemies. He recognised the technique and the sheer need to answer.

But the man in the dirty remnants of a prisoner uniform stayed silent. Pride was the only thing he had left in him.

“Do you think you have learned your lesson now, Gellert Grindelwald?”

A man wearing azure robes came out of the shadows. It was a visage the former Dark Lord of Nurmengard had not seen in decades, but he recognised him instantly nonetheless.

“Knight Explorer...or should I call you Leonardo Polo?”

His voice was weak and the words were difficult to speak. He had remained too long alone in his cell.

“That depends if you prefer Knight Teacher, Dreaded Master of Death, or Dark Lord Grindelwald, I suppose.” The black-bearded man shrugged. “Names are a funny thing, in the end. We have so many of them, and it is up to us to decide which of them matters in our life.”

Gellert Grindelwald took the few seconds of silence to empty his reserve of water. In different days, it would have been an unacceptable risk for him, but he had a hint or two that water was going to be the least of his problems in the next minutes. When he opened his mouth again, his voice was clear enough that he did not need to repeat himself.

“I don’t suppose you have made all these efforts just to remember the good old times.”

As the Knight Explorer of the Exchequer, a very wealthy man of the Portuguese Wizarding community – or he had been decades ago – and a famous adventurer always involved in one expedition or another to discover ancient cultures and tombs, Leonardo’s time was extremely valuable. There was no way this attack was just random chance.

“The King wants to see you.”

Despite having expected, dreaded and prepared for these words since 1945, the weakened body of the Dark Lord shivered and it was not due to the cold.

“I suppose it is not to give me a medal.”

Polo chuckled.

“I think it is a safe bet, Gellert.” The tone of the Portuguese wizard was almost friendly but Grindelwald heard the steel undertone underneath. “You deserted our organisation and used the powerbase we helped you build to rampage across Europe like a mad dragon. Don’t think the Builder, the Recruiter, and the Treasurer have forgotten the mess you made of their plans.”

“Please, Leonardo.” The old and tired prisoner shook his head. “I will readily admit I’ve made a mess and destroyed decades of their plans, but you don’t have to dramatise. The purges and losses I inflicted to France, Russia, Italy, and the rest of Europe...they were already taking advantage of them by the time my armies were trying to mount a last defence in Germany.”

The Knight Explorer made a non-committal noise.

“It may be so, but the other Knights can hold grudges like no one else.” A wand was pointed at the bars of his cell, and suddenly the charmed-metal was transfigured into spaghetti. Gellert raised an eyebrow: normally a vicious Blood-Boiling curse prevented any wand-wielding wizard from doing exactly that sort of things in the upper cells, and forty-seven men had learned it to their sorrow since he had been imprisoned there. There were ways to bypass it, of course, but they were incredibly slow and difficult. And Knight Explorer had done it on a whim. A point had been made. He was not – and never would be now – a match for the eldest Knights.

Standing on his two legs was difficult and nearly left him out of breath. Leonardo had to help him once he stepped out of the narrow prison he had been confined in for so long.

“The Germans, Danish, Swedes, and a few other countries’ battalions are going to be here soon.” He warned his former colleague as he half-dragged him towards the eastern portion of the castle.

“Knight Necromancer is waiting for them,” Polo replied in an apparent uncaring tone.

“Knight Necromancer?” He asked. There had been no one holding this title when he had left the Exchequer in the 1930s.

“She’s Knight Alchemist’s replacement.” Gellert grimaced. Too bad, he had enjoyed Flamel’s company. Well, he had enjoyed another man’s bed far more in that same period, but the Alchemist had been an erudite and a peerless researcher. Not to mention he was one of the less radical Exchequer members.

“You haven’t told me what the King wants from my weak bones,” the man who at the peak of his power had terrified every wizard and witch from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

“I am not privy to every detail,” said the Portuguese wizard as they descended then levitated down a ruined series of stairs. Everywhere in the prison-fortress was fissured and looked on the brink of collapse. There were former prison cells opened to nothing, corridors blocked by mountains of debris and stones falling from the ceilings. The curses which had held for half a century were exploding or randomly activating, and more than once his guide-rescuer had to cast shields to protect both of them. “But I think he needs your knowledge and expertise to finish one of his big projects.”

“Which one?” If there was something you couldn’t accuse the King of the Exchequer of, it was underfunding his research and development branch. At any moment of time in the beginning of the twentieth century, there had been hundreds of magical experiments and innovations occurring in the Exchequer’s most secure laboratories.

“The King renamed it Paradox recently, but I think you knew it under the name Project Kronos.”

“I remember this one,” said Gellert Grindelwald, trying not to scream in pain when part of the corridor collapsed and Knight Explorer seized him painfully by the arm to save him from an incredibly unpleasant death. “It was one of the most difficult challenges I’ve ever faced and in the end we had to dispose of a lot of Muggles for a less than optimal result. The Time-Turner may be an unstoppable asset were it be perfected, but my efforts were less than successful.”

A corridor disappeared under an avalanche of stone and dust on their left. His fortress-prison was falling apart. Despite the torments it had given him during his imprisonment, Gellert Grindelwald could not help but feel regret. This place had been his greatest masterwork. Without doubt, it was also one of the last material legacies of his actions. Dark actions certainly, but he had changed the face of Europe, conquered nearly every Great European school for wizards and witches, and destroyed for good the remnants of the Old Order.

Knight Explorer began to run, casting powerful Charms to carry him like he was weightless and then jumping outside a hundred meters above the ground.

It took five endless seconds before the Apparition took them away, but in this time the former Dark Lord had the leisure to contemplate one of the biggest armies of Inferi he had ever seen fighting against hundreds of wizards.

Evidently, the new Knight Necromancer was quite powerful. He had stopped attending the Necromancy courses a few months before being expelled from Durmstrang, but he could recognise someone far more powerful than him in the Art of Undeath.

Once the Apparition ended, the last prisoner of Nurmengard could hear his accomplice speak to another figure before collapsing and letting oblivion claim him.

“Operation Dantès successful.”

**Author’s note**: As promised, a new chapter and with a lot more action than the previous one. The Exchequer is finally on the move, and Nurmengard is the first fortress to fall...

Links for the story:

On P a treon: ww w. p a treon.c om/ Antony444

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