**Chapter 113**

**The Rules have changed**

**22 February 1995, Buckingham Palace, London**

"This was an interesting conversation," the Prime Minister admitted to the blonde witch once the Queen had formally ended the royal audience and they walked to their next destination.

Though of course by 'interesting', the British politician meant 'a bit terrifying'.

He was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. As such he often met the men and the women who served in this country's armed forces. There had never been any doubt that the majority of these soldiers could kill him if they suddenly turned their guns against him.

It was quite a novel experience, however, to have a conversation with someone who could likely engage a significant part of the Royal Navy alone, and most likely emerge victorious.

"The Lady Protector is a remarkable young woman." Lady Narcissa Malfoy said neutrally.

"And a very dangerous one," he couldn't help but add.

"Yes." The new Royal Mage gave him the time to make his own repartee or two, but the Prime Minister was not in a hurry. Therefore it was the blonde witch who spoke again. "It bothers you that she is that young."

"Is it that evident?" the Prime Minister asked in a light tone.

"You're keeping it relatively under control compared to some members of the Wizengamot," Narcissa Malfoy assured him. "I think in fact that most of the neutral votes we counted today were from mages who believed the Lady Protector's age was an obstacle by itself."

"But in the end, the motion to name her Lady Protector carried on."

Obviously, if a fourteen-year-old girl had come before the House of Lords and the Commons, and suggested they fired him before naming her Prime Minister, there would have been plenty of chuckles, no matter the upheavals caused by the existence of magic.

"Many factions agreed beforehand that the disorder of Fudge's administration couldn't be tolerated anymore. But I will admit, we have far fewer problems with...how did Her Majesty call them? Child soldiers?"

"It is an appropriate designation for them, I think."

Everyone had seen what Alexandra Potter had done on the bridge of Westminster. And this had been before learning that the murderous maniac 'Galahad' had been magically aged, so really this whole episode of destruction had involved one very young wizard who didn't look like it and a very young witch.

"When we lead our children to the wand-maker at eleven, we give them a weapon," the Royal Mage acknowledged the problem with a grimace. "We call it a magical focus, and we try to make sure our children are educated as responsibly as we can, but-"

This time it was not a grimace, but the expression on the witch's face was particularly disgusted.

"There have always been children in our world who had the courage to raise their wands against far older enemies," Narcissa Malfoy calmly admitted. "Many Dark and Light Lords had no reluctance to slaughter newborn babies. When they are forced to face these opponents, clearly, the children are choosing to make the sacrifices necessary for their survival."

"One can only hope that Lady Alexandra Potter is a tragic exception and not the norm."

"You saw the magical recordings of the Tasks of the recent European Magical Tournament."

Yes, yes he had. And the Prime Minister wished he hadn't.

Some moments had been amusing, like the use of trebuchets.

Others had very much been the stuff of nightmares.

The fight against the Cockatrice of the First Task alone had been sufficient to convince many of his political allies to use the vomit bags.

"Since you mentioned this very sensible subject, Her Majesty strongly suggests it is time to end the bloodbath. It is a position where I am in complete agreement with her."

It went without saying that plenty of other Presidents and Prime Ministers had not reacted well to the news that gladiatorial games had been organised in this day and age. For the moment, Italy had not exploded by some miracle, but its neighbours were not exactly amused by the fact an honest 'Carnival Civil War' had played out in front of their citizens in Venice, and if some terrorists had not tried to kill everyone, the wizards would have gotten away with it.

"I am not a member of the organisation," the Royal Mage replied, "but I know there are already plenty of rumours that the few Tasks which are yet to take place will be considerably modified. Since Rome and other governments want non-magical overseers among the spectators, it is likely the last deaths happened at Venice."

"Good."

The smile he was given was definitely ironic.

"But?" he was forced to voice.

"Don't forget that many of these Champions didn't need a lot of moral incentives from the adults to begin the slaughter. Many of the Tasks could have been done without killing, though naturally the nature of the Tasks and the magical beasts they were facing were plenty of danger by themselves. There were many old and young feuds waiting to be settled. This Tournament, in many ways, was a polite alternative to a long bloody war."

The Prime Minister wished he hadn't heard that. Alas, it made plenty of sense. It was an awful calculus, it had to be said. No matter how mature or battle-hardened, these young wizards and witches were children. It was horrible to see them die and redden the sands of the arena with their blood. Unfortunately, the alternatives may all have been worse...

"Many will hope these feuds are going to stop now. I don't think the United Kingdom will tolerate something like these 'Coliseum Games' existing. We have academic inter-school competitions, yes. They don't include fighting a giant sea snake or killing the participants of the other schools." The Prime Minister paused, before deciding being blunt would not be a bad thing right now. "I have about half of the House of Lords and two-thirds of the House of Commons wondering what kind of insanity reigns in your foremost magical school!"

"You are not the only one who wonders, Mister Prime Minister."

Ah, yes. Albus Dumbledore was a long-time political enemy of Narcissa Malfoy, wasn't he?

"Hopefully, the negotiations for temporary alternatives to Hogwarts should alleviate some of these concerns?"

"We don't have a shortage of overseers." The Prime Minister let his lips twitch with the shadow of a smile. "Cambridge and Oxford, among many others, are already pushing with all the influence they have. The next weeks are going to be very interesting in that regard."

"And the other matter?"

Ah yes, the other matter. In many ways, it had been somewhat reassuring to have the confirmation Alexandra Potter was still a child, in a way which mattered.

"Film-makers will be contacted. Given how eventful the return of magic had been and how much the public is favourable to certain magical inventions, I don't think finding the funds or the actors will be a problem..."

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When Alexandra left Buckingham Palace, she took quite a few seconds to realise that the crowd had easily swelled to three or four times its previous size in her absence.

But once the noise grew to a thunderous rumble, it would have required far more than being lost in her thoughts to miss this little problem.

It was really intimidating.

And of course the Basilisk Slayer knew far better than to think the entire population of London was here today.

It wasn't.

But there had to be tens of thousands of London inhabitants these last days mustered behind the fragile obstacle marking the boundary between the Palace and the world outside.

It was bad enough for her. In mere seconds, her Hydra senses were slowly overwhelmed by all the noise and the sheer amount of excitation coming from everywhere.

And there was worse.

In the front of this sizeable gathering, there were what appeared to be a small army of journalists, camera-carrying TV personnel, reporters, paparazzi, and dozens of other representatives of the press.

"Would it be recognised as cowardice if I disappeared in a flash of thunder?" the Ravenclaw Champion asked to the senior soldier who had escorted her out of Buckingham.

"I believe it would."

There was no smile, but Alexandra could recognise the amusement shining in one's eyes, thank you very much.

"Formidable," the new Lady Protector of the Isles commented in a disabused tone. "Really *formidable*."

"They aren't going to eat you, Lady Protector. I think?"

"You are very lucky that turning all your uniforms into a fluorescent pink could be considered a criticism of the British monarchy," Alexandra shook her head.

"Err...thank you for your magnanimity?"

Alexandra snorted.

"I am not magnanimous, Captain. And since I think Her Majesty would rather be unhappy if I dispersed this crowd with battle-magic, I need someone to open me a path in this enthusiastic mass of overly curious spectators."

Several soldiers, who had been on the edge of bursting into laughter until now, had their pleasant expressions disappear from their faces. They could see like her how much of a monumental chore it promised to be.

Still, it was better to face the lions today. Delaying the matter would not decrease the eagerness many of these men and women showed today. Moreover, Alexandra had faced many journalists before and after the Tasks of the Tournament. This wasn't a subject where she was completely out of her depth.

It was something the Hydra Animagus had to repeat to herself several times as she stepped forwards. There were many people shouting and screaming, and keeping an emotionless mask was a real trial. The Champion of Death was almost considering the idea of the Judges acknowledging her Fifth Task to be that kind of challenge. It had to count as a contest of wits and wisdom, no?

A few seconds were sufficient to realise that it was not going to be like at the Scuola Regina. The greater numbers aside, the non-magical press was clearly far less disciplined and respectful than the European journalists who had interviewed them after each Task. Of course, most of these wizards and witches knew what they had done to earn their top scores. The Venetian journalists were eager for some juicy gossip, but they weren't stupid: pestering Lyudmila Romanov and asking her irritating questions was an easy way to receive some very Dark and near-impossible to remove curses.

Nonetheless, as the tumult grew out of control, it became clear to her that every 'journalist' in front of her shouting what he or she wanted to know along dozens of his or her peers was not going to have exactly the effect she wished.

This was the time Atalanta chose to arrive and deliver the letter Alexandra was waiting for, before perching on her shoulder.

Naturally, her beautiful owl hooted angrily immediately after as hundreds of flashes erupted to photograph her.

And now that she was close enough...by the Morrigan, were several spectators raising copies of the *Daily Prophet* above their heads? The destruction of the Statute had resulted in some unexpected effects. And no, it was not any 'normal' copy of the Ministry-approved newspaper. It was the special edition which had been immediately published the day after she killed the two Basilisks at the end of her second year.

The ruckus wasn't going to get any better any time soon, and the less said about the flashes which almost blinded her, the better.

Alexandra drew her wand and cast a series of loud and brilliant blue fireworks above her head.

"Five questions, and no more," the Ravenclaw Champion spoke, before randomly choosing someone. "You."

"Lady Protector, there has been an astounding rumours of wizards using owls to deliver their letters! Is this owl used for such purposes?"

Something told her she hadn't chosen the most intelligent journalist of the lot if they chose owl topics above everything...oh, well, their problem, not hers.

"Yes. This beautiful owl is a mail owl, and she's also my oldest and most loyal companion. Her name is Atalanta." Alexandra petted her owl, and of course the snowy owl unfurled her wings so that the thousands assembled before Buckingham could marvel at her magnificent feathers and avian predatory grace. Needless to say, there were many 'ahhhhhs', 'oohhhhs', and other forms of approval. Atalanta loved that kind of attention, minus the flashes. "This is not the only species of birds which has been magically altered and bred in large numbers to transport letters and packages, of course. And the magical society has also pushed for other forms of communication. But owls remain a favourite in Britain."

If anything, that convinced all the other journalists to try to push forwards to place their mikes and everything to manifest their desire to be chosen.

At least this time Alexandra could see more clearly the names of the newspapers. In the end, she chose one she knew to be well-known on the international stage.

"There have been many rumours, Lady Protector, about the important aspects of the audience Her Majesty just invited you to attend. What were the major points of discussion?"

"I don't think any of you will be surprised to hear Her Majesty asked for a detailed and truthful account of all the events which resulted in the final shattering of the Statute of Secrecy and the revelation, from your point of view, of magic to the entire world," Alexandra said as diplomatically as she could. "Obviously, I also came to inform the Queen and the Prime Minister of the new political situation and reforms awaiting the Assembly of the Wizengamot and the Ministry of Magic in my persona of Lady Protector. As for the full details, I'm afraid you will have to wait for tomorrow: the Prime Minister politely requested for several of the points of our discussion to be discussed first in front of the Houses of Parliament before being revealed to the press."

There were, it must be said, many groans of disappointment after that.

"This is good to hear," the journalist who had asked the pertinent question conceded. "But-"

"Is it true you killed a giant Cerberus and an army of giant snakes before your thirteenth birthday?" interrupted an impolite man.

"No, it was a sea snake!"

"I've heard there was some involvement of dragons and demons!"

Alexandra sighed and transformed her left hand into a redoubtable claw. Then she made sure the beginning of lightning sparks began to manifest on top of her scales.

The effect she obtained was very much desired: most of the offenders abruptly shut up.

But this made her internally sigh.

No wonder Morag and all her friends had thought she was crazy. By the end of the ten years, Alexandra had a feeling that relinquishing the duties of Lady Protector would be something that would bring tears of joy to her face, if only not to deal with these mobs of journalists and enthusiastic crowds anymore...

**23 February 1995, on the shores of the Black Lake, not far from Hogwarts' outermost wards, Scotland**

The arrival of his cousin was hardly discreet. First a lot of snow was blown away, then there was a loud groan. And then-

"I hate paparazzi," the witch his friends had nicknamed 'Hydra Queen' hissed.

Dudley couldn't help it, he snickered.

"Come on, you're on the first page of every British newspaper worth reading-"

"If you value your fangs, cousin, you will stop right there."

Dudley Dursley was not an idiot. He stopped right there.

"Okay...err...you wanted us to call you if we found something near the Black Lake which felt a bit suspicious. And we did."

The young wererat wasn't going to say it aloud, but the name for this lake was very well-deserved. It might be near-frozen right now, and everything nearby disappeared under a mantle of snow, but there was something sinister about it.

But maybe it was just his imagination.

"They were here when you arrived?"

"Yeah. Piers and Malcolm arrived first, and it was already there. At first they thought one of your red-haired pranksters had invented some kind of fireworks, but it would have been weird, even for them."

The 'things' were shining with a lot of red and golden lights, but you couldn't look at them for too long. A few of his band had tried, and got temporarily blinded for their trouble. One thing was sure, it looked like the holo-screens in sci-fi movies, but instead of projecting star maps or something cool, it created a lot of triangular stuff. Maybe Alexandra's Headmaster was one of those monsters who venerated mathematics?

"These are Alchemical transmutation circles, Dudley."

"I'm taking you up at your word, cousin. Err...and what are those transmutathingies doing?"

"Well, for now, clearly they do nothing." The green eyes for a second looked like they were going to throw lightning at the offending triangles. "If I was arrogant or stupid enough to send a Dreadnought here, however, I suspect it would rapidly change. They could act as sea mines and anti-battleship weapons."

"Too bad," Dudley replied. "Your big castle in the distance would have been an easy target."

The whisper in the next seconds suspiciously sounded like 'boys will be boys', something that Dudley found quite amusing. After all, he wasn't the one to make a trail of death and carnage across the continent.

"So an amphibious assault in this direction is impossible."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Alexandra told him smugly. "The Alchemical circles were only possible because he carved them in the ice. Logically, that means the trap is only valid as long as there's ice upon the Black Lake. The moment it melts, you have to start from scratch all over again."

And judging by how many circles and triangles there had been, it must not have been that easy, Dudley was sure.

"But as I said, I am not going to send the ships we have here. I don't intend to destroy Hogwarts if I can avoid it."

"Yeah, you want to send them to Portsmouth. Can't we keep them for a while?"

"Will you pay for them?" This time it was Dudley's turn to groan. "Maintenance in winter is always a chore, and many goblins and other operatives have been contacted by various parties in order to increase the pressure. For some reason, neither the Exchequer nor a large number of our 'allies' feel very comfortable leaving me in control of an armada."

"I don't know why they're uncomfortable," Dudley argued back. "Yes, we can do a lot of damage to a big city in a few hours, but you can pretty much devastate a capital in minutes."

"That's an exaggeration, Dudley. If I don't have Death's complete support, I will be exhausted long before I destroy a third of a big city."

The young wererat sniffed. He was absolutely not convinced.

"Anyway. If I really have to use the Black Lake for an attack on the castle, it will be best to shape the waters into a tidal wave and use that to demolish both outer wards and most physical obstacles in the way," Alexandra told him completely truthfully. "I won't bother wasting my time taking a Dreadnought with me. Why would I? Hogwarts is a horrible defensive position."

"I thought that was just because we were looking from a few miles away."

"One might think that, cousin. But one would be wrong. People have forgotten, but Hogwarts was built as a school first, and a castle second. Over the years, they relied on the wards and the other magical protections for defence. What should have been the old-fashioned methods to make a castle impregnable were dismantled in the last centuries. There is no moat. The main gates are incredibly solid, but there are a lot of places where you can try to enter via the windows. And let's not speak of the Quidditch Pitch. They dismantled the big protections there, meaning you can fly by broom there, land, and begin the charge. From there, you're only a couple of minutes away from the marble stairs."

Dudley knew it confirmed what he had already thought; his cousin had not the slightest intention to attack her school today, or any other day of that month.

"I thought you hated your Headmaster. And the guys you hate, well..." Dudley mimicked someone being strangled Vader-style.

"Oh I hate him." Alexandra shrugged. "But I am also clever enough to know I can't defeat him in duel here. In this castle, the control of the wards gives him too big an advantage. In a fair fight, I lose. And if I don't fight fair, I will likely make him a martyr for his stupid ideology. So no, for now, Albus Dumbledore is allowed to live and rally the malcontents of Wizarding Britain to his banners."

The way his cousin smiled, Dudley began to pity the poor bastards who hid in the castle.

It was obvious to him Alexandra wasn't attacking because she was letting all those enemies and many others use the school-castle as their headquarters and base. If they felt confident enough that 'Hogwarts' was an impregnable here, they would store a lot of precious things in a single location, no matter how unwise it might sound.

"We're still going to have to make some maps," he said. "You know, to prepare in case you want us to launch an assault with minimal warning. It helps that the castle doesn't appear as a desolate ruin anymore, but we need maps."

"Maps..." The green eyes suddenly seemed very thoughtful, for a reason which escaped him. "Yes, I am going to see what I can do on that front."

**24 February 1994, the Art Wing, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

To be honest, Lilian had thought there would be far more explosions than there was once she had been told her daughter had returned.

When you made your first deep plunge into politics, it was only a matter of time before the young wizard or witch snapped. If you didn't snap...well, that was when everyone was right to be concerned. Bottling up your annoyance and your other negative emotions was never a good idea.

So yes, the female vampire had been somewhat reassured to learn a training ground in the mountains had been half-disintegrated by a storm of emerald lightning. There had been no astonishment on that front.

No, the surprise was far more that one hour later, Alexandra has been seen marching towards the Art Wing. This was a good mystery, and since she intended to speak with her daughter in anyways, it was time to solve it.

The sun had of course set hours ago when she entered the Art Wing, and the crimson enchanted lanterns of the Venetian school were now active, as vampire students were now given the opportunity to attend their lessons for the night.

But as the nocturnal students were listening to their instructors in the classrooms, the Art Wing and all its specialised rooms were almost deserted.

Almost.

Lilian found her daughter speaking with two Succubae far away in a private room which smelled of parchments and ink.

It made her somewhat smile that though the three young women had undoubtedly sensed her arrival, their current art session was so important for them that not a single head turned to welcome her.

"Now you have to imbue the parchment with your magic," the older Succubus announced with the melodious voice that was so common of her species. "The onyx is now part of the paint. You can begin."

The Enchantress had to admit she was kind of curious about what they were doing, and her interest increased when she saw the left hand of her daughter transform into scales and claws, before plunging her hand into a pot of something that looked like black paint or dark ink...but appearances could be misleading.

It was proven a second later as the claws seemed to absorb the black liquid. Quickly, Alexandra turned and plunged her half-transformed hand into a small basin where a parchment floated.

Before her curious vampiric eyes, her daughter went to work and after several seconds, the details became clearer: the 'not-ink' was used to imbue not only magic, but Runes into the parchment.

These were black-coloured Runes, and though she was not a complete amateur, Lilian didn't recognise the glyphs in question.

Even not knowing what result was expected at the end, it was obvious that each time a Rune was correctly completed, the ancient symbol began to burn in flames of red-black, and this despite being plunged into a magical liquid reagent.

"You can begin the evocation now."

Lilian had never doubted her green-eyed daughter was gifted in this particular magical class, but what followed was impressive, even for a young adult.

"Straif, Ur, Oir, Wunjo, Ur, Odala, the travel of the journeys to come call to you, Ankh, seal the memories of the day to come..."

Weaving more than three Runes into a single evocation was in general sufficient to get a passing grade in your fourth year of magical education. This one had twenty-six, and as far as she could judge, it was more like something worthy of being presented as a final project for your NEWTs.

Of course, the two Succubae were hardly idle either. Their lips echoed with old Latin incantations, imbuing tiny amounts of magic and adding more paint into the basin.

It was a slow procedure, but none of the three students present seemed to mind.

The minutes passed, and save a few instructions, everything the three did was done in complete silence.

And finally, it was over.

The parchment was delicately removed from the basin, and to Lily's surprise, there was no sign of the Runes or obvious magical glyphs of any sort.

But the parchment was hardly pristine or empty.

Where should have been a grey-white surface, there were now black mountains represented, and...some kind of volcano?

It wasn't a painting, she realised after a few seconds. It was a magical map.

"Cast the stasis spells once you will have finished admiring your work," the lead Succubus said gently to Alexandra. "We will help you finish everything tomorrow evening. Same hour?"

"I will be there."

The two black-haired Succubae sang in their own language something joyous, bowed to her, and then departed.

They were now alone.

"Thank you for waiting, mother." Alexandra turned to face her. "We were a bit busy, and the process can't be paused until this stage. As a result-"

"You don't have to apologise, Alexandra," the female vampire did admit she took a certain pleasure passing her hand into the black mane of her daughter. It was unkempt at this hour; Alexandra had seemingly removed some of the efforts of Stella Zabini to appear as a proper Lady Protector. "I wasn't aware you were interested in joining the map-makers."

"To be honest, until this week...err...I didn't know that myself. But something led me to wonder if the Scuola Regina had an art section including maps, and I have to admit, I really enjoyed it. Of course, I don't know if it is something I will pursue..."

"Take your time," the former Gryffindor student advised. "I didn't begin to paint until I was seventeen. You have years ahead of you to decide if you want to pursue it as your hobby outside of academics and other career duties."

Nonetheless, the female vampire smiled. The Marauders had created the 'Marauder's Map', and now one of the daughters of the core members manifested an interest in map-making. History often repeated in ways even the Powers struggled to foresee...

"Evidently, this isn't a map of this world. Where did you get the inspiration?"

"It is a detailed map of Mordor, from the *Lord of the Rings*," Alexandra told her. "I wanted something a bit more ambitious, but I was told to begin with the basics. And with its dark mountains, its natural boundaries, and its colours of black and red, Mordor is relatively easy to create."

"True. Your art mentors said it wasn't complete?"

"Well, there's the legend and quite a few other things to add," her daughter shrugged. "But about nine-tenths of the map creation was done. Watch!"

The parchment was moved on an empty table, and then Alexandra's wand touched the volcano at the centre of the map.

Immediately, the changes were incredibly spectacular. It was as if their surroundings had become alive and engulfed with smoke. It was a minor illusion, but it was extremely realistic. The volcano seemed to burn and erupt before her eyes, creating rivers of magma, feeding the dark forges of the nearby immense fortress the old-fashioned Dark Lords would have been proud to call theirs.

And then the magically-recorded voice of Alexandra was heard.

"Some say everything began when the Rings of Power were forged. Three were given to the Elves, immortal and wisest of all species. Seven were bought by the Dwarves, great jewel-makers and miners of the mountains. Nine were claimed by the race of Men, mortals, courageous, and tempted by power. But they were all duped. For in secret, one more Ring was forged. In the forges of the Orodruin, the Mountain of Doom, the Dark Lord Sauron forged in secret a Ring of Power to dominate all others. In his Ring he poured his will, his malice, and his will to dominate all life on Middle Earth. A Ring to rule them All."

The illusion and the pyrotechnics ended, and the map was once again a single map.

Lilian applauded.

"A very impressive piece of map art."

"Thank you, mother." Alexandra bared her fangs. "And I intend to create more of them."

She waited five seconds. Then she asked the important question.

"How much do you like British politics, then?"

"I remember fondly the time when I was wrestling crocodiles," her daughter groaned.

**25 February 1995, the Council Room of the Wizengamot, Ministry of Magic, London**

The Houses of the Light called it the 'Dark Order'.

His grandmother called it 'forcing them to eat the corpse of the Old Wizengamot'.

The ex-Death Eaters called the measures 'reforms'.

Neville was beginning to think the three points of view were not wrong.

There was now a vampire, a goblin, and a leprechaun seated among the Lords of the Wizengamot, and no, it wasn't the beginning of a joke.

The Boy-Who-Lived didn't even know how the hell Alexandra Potter had been in contact with the vampires of the Soul Drinkers! Never mind why the vampires were listening to her now! They should be furious at her, right? The Champion of Death had slaughtered the other British Vampire Coven! They should be angry, demanding a ruinous blood price!

But they weren't doing that. The same was true about the goblins. They were rumours many account managers had been killed, but by the deferent tone used by War Commander Fang-thing...Fangtusk, or something like that, you wouldn't believe it!

It was like the more people Potter killed, the happier some wizards and non-wizards were!

Neville wasn't going to say it out loud.

He wasn't *that* stupid.

Yesterday had proven that during the debates before the Minister's nomination you could properly debate, but you had to do it constructively.

It had been done in such a logical manner that there had even been a law passed to forbid the Lady Protector from killing anyone on the spot in the middle of the Wizengamot Council!

Neville had been honestly surprised the law was debated, never mind voted upon, but as his grandmother told him afterwards, nothing would stop the Ravenclaw Dark Lady from simply arresting her enemies, dragging them outside the Council Room, giving them a trial, and then killing them a few minutes later.

At least with this law, Alexandra Potter would have to give the Wizengamot and the Minister of Magic a reason for why she felt like murdering someone. Unfortunately, when half of the assembly wouldn't move for a 'Light terrorist', this wasn't exactly good news.

"But what about Hogwarts?"

With great difficulty, Neville managed to focus back on the debate.

Especially as it was Lord Greengrass who was speaking. The man was a cold snake all right, but his two daughters were Slytherin students; he had to know keeping Hogwarts closed for months was not good for anyone – so far only the Champions and their substitutes had their scholarship unaffected, as the Scuola Regina had not barred its doors to them.

"I took the liberty to summon Professor Flitwick and Sprout to answer some of your questions." Alexandra Potter replied, imperturbable and near-immobile on her dark seat. Neville was going to be honest enough to admit it was no throne; rather it was more an armchair. But it was midnight black with a sigil of a golden Hydra on the back, and past the first day, the Dark Lady had dressed in black robes with some black and emerald jewellery, making sure no one forgot she was a Black Witch.

And no, the words were not a bluff. The Heads of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff had really come to stand in front of the Wizengamot.

It began with some very technical details, some he didn't understand at all, but-

"With Lord Smith no longer among the living and House Malfoy formally relinquishing its claims, there are enough empty seats to formally call for the creation of a new Board of Governors," the Lady Protector spoke calmly, and the words generated plenty of whispers.

Wait a minute...Potter had killed Lord Smith because she wanted a new Board of Governors? That was-

"I don't think it is a secret that I think the Board has terrible flaws." The green eyes stared mercilessly at many members of the audience. "To begin with, they let Albus Dumbledore have free reign to do what he wished, despite the fact he clearly had insufficient time to do all his jobs competently. Education is something incredibly important and the education of witch and wizard children even more so. We need new members on the Board, members who are as impartial as we can find, and not chosen for their devotion to the current Headmaster."

Neville grimaced deep inside. It was...not pleasant to hear that. The more days passed, the more he realised how much Potter really, really hated the guts of Dumbledore. She had never tried to pretend she loved the Headmaster before, but since the end of the Statute, the Champion of Death was really making her distaste clear.

"But what about Hogwarts' independence? There is a Charter!" a Light Lady protested.

"And the Charter clearly says that by a unanimous vote, the Board of Governors can suspend or fire the current Headmaster," Alexandra Potter dismissed the argument in an instant. "It has been done before, and not long ago. I believe it happened during my second year, when the Chamber of Secrets was opened?"

There was a lot of teeth-grinding, but what could you say about that?

Neville hoped it was the end of the debate. His hopes weren't fulfilled.

To his shock and growing horror, there were some members pleading for the last part of the year to take place in a Muggle university! Yes, a Muggle university, it wasn't a joke! Neville had no idea why Oxford and Cambridge were so important and not a place like London, but it looked like there were already talks with the Muggle government!

Oh, and Professor Flitwick was named Acting-Headmaster. It was very temporary, and their Charms teacher was very vocal that he wanted to teach Charms and Duelling, not be stuck **in** an administrative role. Plus Lord MacDougal went on to tell everyone that the Heads of House should not be teaching classes, but be dedicated teachers in their own right to make sure every student was comfortable and able to deal with the magical curriculum.

"In your opinion, is the Sorting System in need of reform?"

Ha! What a ridiculous question to ask Professor Sprout! Of course she was going to answer-

"Yes," the Head of Hufflepuff replied without hesitation. WHAT? "I have seen friendships broken at the very beginning of a young wizard or witch's scholarship because they were not sorted into the same House as his or her friend. While House Hufflepuff does its best to build bridges between different Houses and build up the qualities of unity and comradery, there is no denying that 'House unity' is often abused both by Hufflepuff and the other Houses to close ranks and brutally separate the members from the outsiders. It is a sad reality that the Houses divide, esteemed Lords of the Wizengamot. If it was up to me, the Sorting would take place in year three or four. Friendships and bonds shouldn't be broken by something as reckless as a Hat peering into your mind, especially one we have no way to confirm if it is truly fulfilling the Founder's noble ideals."

The Wizengamot exploded into a loud tumult of shouts and accusations, and this time, it took the Lady Protector's lightning to restore order.

**26 February 1995, Hogwarts, Scotland**

For several minutes after his three allies departed, Albus Dumbledore watched the grounds of his beloved school.

As it had once again snowed during the night, it was a beautiful spectacle which should have raised his spirits. Powdered partially in white, the Forbidden Forest looked far less threatening. The Quidditch Pitch's towers looked like gigantic snowmen. Hogwarts stood like it had for more than a millennium.

But as much as this vision could have made a perfect painting of winter nature, the Headmaster of Hogwarts didn't like it.

It was lifeless. It was empty.

There were no students among that scenery, and without them, Hogwarts had lost its purpose.

Albus only turned his head away from the window when Severus entered his office.

"Your friends should be more careful," the dark-haired Potion Master declared.

"We both know that the two Hit-Wizards patrolling between the outer wards and Hogsmeade are just for appearances' sake." The Defeater of Grindelwald grimaced. "I am more concerned about these...these Muggle journalists. How in the name of Merlin did they discover Hogwarts' precise location so quickly?"

The expression the Head of House Slytherin gave him had to be the one he reserved for his Gryffindor students.

"There are hundreds of Muggle-born students who attended Hogwarts in the last decades. A few of them talking was largely enough. And the moment enough Muggles know of the school's existence, the 'crumbling ruin' wards died. After that, it is a child's game, especially since Hogsmeade is next door."

The former Chief Warlock wished there was something he could say against this reasoning, but the logic was undeniable.

And the damage was done, best to not forget that.

Unless a way was found to once again cast the Statute of Secrecy and erase the memories of billions of Muggle about magic, the existence of Hogwarts would not be hidden to the other world.

"What did Lord Goldstein want this time?" Severus asked.

"He was here to convince me to ignore the insolent child's edicts," Albus was never going to call her Lady Protector, no matter how dire the circumstances. "He and several allies were convinced a proper challenge to the Dark Order can be made if we reopen the school."

For the first time in days, the Head of House Slytherin showed something that could be acknowledged as amusement.

"That would be quite a feat." Immediately after these words, there was a snort. "You have neither the teachers nor the means to pay them."

"House Goldstein is the wealthiest House of the Isles," the Headmaster reminded his Potion Master. "And we have now the full and unconditional support of House Smith."

"This support will last just enough for Potter to gather enough evidence so that she can organise a nice little show trial for all your supporters," Severus countered. "She has the brains of her mother, don't forget."

"This young Dark Lady is not invincible, and her political coalition is extremely shaky," Albus Dumbledore said in a tone as cold as the weather outside. "Overestimating her will do nothing but demoralize the cause of the Light!"

"And underestimating her like you did in the chambers of the Wizengamot will lead many of your friends to an early grave."

For several seconds, he glared at the Head of House Slytherin. He abandoned the silent treatment after figuring it wouldn't change the truth.

He, Albus Dumbledore, had been humiliated like never before, and by a fourteen-year-old Dark lady.

Worse, it had been done in front of the entire Wizengamot!

It was a defeat the likes of which he'd never suffered before.

But it had happened, and now the Ministry and the Wizengamot had chosen to embrace the Dark Order.

"I recognise I underestimated her. That won't happen again."

Severus nodded, and returned to the initial subject.

"I don't know how many teachers you can convince to return and add their numbers to Binns and Trelawney, but I can tell you from my discreet queries that none of my Slytherins intend to return."

"None?" Albus frowned. Surely that was an exaggeration. To be sure, they were scions of many Dark Houses, but there were Moderates' Heirs and Heiresses-

"None," Severus repeated. "The few which bothered to send me back letters with detailed explanations made clear that any return of their children came with the pre-condition you were going to be thrown out of the castle beforehand."

"Do you think they were threatened by Bellatrix Black?"

He received an expression of disbelief as his sole 'reward'.

"I would rather say they really didn't like how outmatched most of the Hogwarts Champions are compared to their competitors during the Tournament. Rumours that Hogwarts' standards were falling internationally spread before you became Headmaster, but now they have been proven true. And most of the 'Dark' hated you in the first place. Now with the Black Files opened in the middle of the Wizengamot? Many are feeling vindicated."

Albus had never desired to learn the Dark Arts. But in this instance, he really wished to know how to resurrect Cassiopeia Black...just to kill her personally.

The damn Dark Witch had been dead for a couple of years now, but her legacy continued to be a dreadful poison which had no antidote. The Black Files were her tools of damnation, and now the Dark Lady had them, one reason of many why the Wizengamot had knelt before her mere days after the Statute collapsed.

"We could reopen Hogwarts without House Slytherin."

"Yes," Severus agreed all too easily. "But Potter was not a Slytherin. Amelia Bones, the new Minister, isn't a Slytherin either."

They were Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff-sorted, yes.

"House Smith is in Hufflepuff, and is on our side. The Sorting of one individual isn't representative of a House's political allegiance!"

His Potion Master inclined his head in visible surprise.

"Headmaster, have you attended a Hufflepuff class recently?"

**27 February 1995, the Council Room of the Wizengamot, Ministry of Magic, London**

It said quite a few things, none of them good for future reforms, that the members of the Wizengamot had been quicker to accept a vampire among their numbers than acknowledge how much of a bad idea the Hogwarts Sorting truly was.

Alexandra sighed internally, and decided she would think of how to solve this problem another day. For now, the good news was that there was a new Board of Governors, and Lord Alan MacDougal had been named as its most senior representative.

And since among the eleven other members you could find names like Lord Pucey and Lady Blackford, it was near-inevitable that before the next week was over, a unanimous vote would be cast to formally suspend Dumbledore, depriving the silver-haired 'Light Lord' of any legitimacy he might have retained after his disastrous Wizengamot stunt.

Still, more or less every nomination of importance she wanted to pass had come into effect. House Macmillan had been given the Department of International Magical Cooperation – no way Alexandra would have left Crouch at his job, the man was competent but an anti-Dark bigot who embraced Light fanaticism when it suited him. House Slughorn had been granted the Speakership of the Wizengamot – not Potion Master Horace Slughorn, obviously, but a distant cousin.

Naturally, there was a price to be paid. In this instance, the aforementioned cost was the dissolution of two entire Departments, Magical Accidents and Control of Magical Creatures, which were going to be rebuilt from the ground up, since the end of the Statute guaranteed they couldn't function as usual. The names of the new Departments were not yet chosen, but for the Department which would succeed the regulation of Obliviators and other stuff, Lord Greengrass would be in charge. And no, he wasn't her preferred choice, but politics was really the art of compromising with people you didn't like very much.

"Do you intend to name yourself as Headmistress of Hogwarts, Lady Protector?"

There was a saying that there was no stupid question. After spending the best part of three days in this Council Room, Alexandra vehemently disagreed.

"No." The Hydra Animagus glared at the idiot who had uttered the idiotic words. "I believe my previous statements on the subject were clear, but it seems *someone*," the moron who had spoken didn't even have the grace to blush, "has auditory problems. So let's make it clear one more time. I will not name myself Headmistress of Hogwarts once the criminal Albus Dumbledore is removed from the school."

Evidently, the Lord who had spoken was one of the wizards who thought they were particularly clever. They really believed she had no idea they were Apparating to Hogwarts every evening to give Dumbledore their reports about everything that had been done during every session.

"Unlike the former Chief Warlock," the Lady Protector continued, "I am humble enough to know that I can't do three jobs at the same time. As long as I am Lady Protector, I won't try to claim any other important position for myself. The one I have is already time-consuming as it stands."

"But..." Lord Goldstein seemed genuinely astonished. He really believed she wanted to remove Dumbledore to take his seat? If true, it was very amusing. "But who will replace Dumbledore, then? We need a Lord-level mage to protect Hogwarts!"

This time Alexandra didn't bother hiding her disgust at how illogical the statement was.

"The foremost magical school of Britain," Alexandra began, leaving unsaid 'no matter how low the threshold was', "does need many qualities from the wizard or the witch who will become the new Headmaster or Headmistress. He or she will need to always have an ear ready for students who approach him or her. He or she will need above average administrative skills. He or she will have to be as close to impartial as a wizard or a witch can possibly be, in order to make sure the inter-House feuds vanish along with one Albus Dumbledore into the historical annals. And obviously, he or she will have to work hand in hand with the Board of Governors so that the best teachers can be hired to provide the best education for the children arriving each September in the Great Hall under a thousand enchanted candles."

Many Lords and Ladies cheered after her words, and Alexandra once again focused on a certain section of the Wizengamot.

"I want everyone to remember that Hogwarts is a school. No matter how many journalists find it spectacular, it is absolutely horrifying that in the last years, there were attacks including Basilisks, Dementors, and other monsters. This state of affairs must end."

"It is not Dumbledore's fault that Hogwarts was attacked!"

Alexandra didn't bother looking at the offender. Lady Zabini, however, raised her wand. This was not exactly a death threat. No, after the law forbidding her to kill anyone on the Wizengamot floor was passed, it was decided that people who didn't ask her for permission to speak would be fined. And depending on the offense, it could end up very expensive, up to three hundred Galleons.

"Albus Dumbledore, instead of asking for help removing the DADA Curse, ended up hiring teachers which included Dark Lords in disguise, veterans unsuited to teaching, spies, and other unsuitable candidates. He also let his Groundskeeper create a colony of Acromantulas right on the doorstep of Hogwarts. What did you think was going to happen when they didn't have any sustenance left in the Forbidden Forest?"

It said quite something that even after the Aurors had led several expeditions into the forest, Alexandra had been forced to go there in person and slaughter hundreds of the giant arachnids. And even then, the Champion of Death knew she hadn't managed to kill them all. These monsters were extremely clever; after the first slaughter, they dispersed, and good luck catching them all.

"It is worth repeating once again," she said as the idiot once again failed to find an explanation for the failings of one Albus Dumbledore, "the magical school is there as a centre of magical learning and education. It is not there to see how students will react in extremely dangerous situations. Yes, Lord Abbot?"

Hannah's father cleared his throat before speaking.

"It may be only tangentially connected to these issues, but many parents of students are wondering if you, Lady Protector, will be here to attend Hogwarts provided it reopens in time for September 1?"

Ah yes, curiosity alone ensured many people would want to know that.

"For the moment, I'm going to answer it is...unlikely I am going to attend Hogwarts next year," Alexandra said slowly. "I suppose many rumours have already spread, so I don't think there is any harm to let you know that I am soon going to enter an Apprenticeship."

There were many murmurs, most of them in approval. The Wizengamot was a very traditional institution at its core, and Apprenticeships had always been an important tradition for the Lords and Ladies of this Council.

"Yes, Lord Frobisher?"

"Err...Lady Protector, an Apprenticeship nine times out of ten requires certain commitments-"

"I can assure you, my Lord, that my future Mistress is extremely aware of my skills, and has been kind enough to arrange a schedule which will allow me to *exceed expectations* as her Apprentice and as the Lady Protector of the Isles."

In the latter's case, it would be made all the easier by the fact there was now a competent administration in charge. For internal affairs, the office of the Lady Protector was more figurehead and assent-giver than a politician in the thick of it. This was why Amelia Bones was the new Minister of Magic, by the way.

"Any more questions? No? Then I believe it is time to invite some young Lords and Ladies to join the ranks of this august assembly."

Alexandra had to admit, she almost laughed at Neville Longbottom's gob-smacked expression when he saw Scylla Yaxley in her red dress.

The poor Boy-Who-Lived had really not seen it coming; that was obvious for everyone who watched him...

**28 February 1995, the dunes around the Black Pyramid, somewhere in the Egyptian Desert**

"You always invite us to such interesting places, oh Champion of the Morrigan."

Alexandra chuckled after Morag's intervention.

"If I'm remembering correctly, you were the one who insisted on being invited along for my 'next great adventure'."

"Nah," the redhead shook her head with a pious expression which fooled no one. "I'm sure you're mistaking me for someone else. I won't go with you again!"

Alexandra raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"That's too bad, I had some spare money and I had this address for a nice Italian pizzeria after we finished our business here..."

"Forget I said anything!"

This time, Alexandra was definitely not the only one to chuckle.

"When you have finished joking," Susan spoke in a superficial 'enforcer tone', "I'm sure you will have the time to examine the battlefield. It seems like our arrival has not gone unnoticed."

"Yes, oh my terrifying Badger," the Lady Protector of Britain replied automatically.

"See?" Hermione didn't bother whispering. "A few days with her Aunt as the Minister of Magic, and she's already being corrupted by the tyrannical authority granted to her!"

"You're speaking in the presence of the Minister's superior," Susan reminded her with a delicious smile.

"I have already declined all responsibility when it comes to the abuses of power of House Bones." Alexandra shrugged.

Morag giggled by her side.

"Alex, I'm almost sure the laws don't work like that."

"I will change the laws, then."

"You're all awful, and whoever gave you power should be arrested," Lyre de Male-Foi intervened, crossing her arms and adopting a reproachful expression. "And now let's please change the subject. What do we do about this Black Pyramid? Enter it?"

"Enter it?" Alexandra grimaced, and it was a very honest reaction. "That would be suicide for anyone who isn't a Champion of Death. Besides, what purpose would it serve?"

"Oh, I don't know, your Dark Majesty. Maybe we would be able to deactivate the Seal of Death?"

"Hermione, I'm not sure there's a button waiting for us which will switch off the magic of this pyramid. A complex ritual activated this Seal, and since then it has opened the equivalent of a vortex to Pandemonium. I'm rather certain it would take an equally complex ritual to stop that."

Or it would require the utter annihilation of the Black Pyramid.

But to achieve that, it was most likely that not even a nuke would be an adequate weapon.

"Why did we come here, then?"

"We came here because the dead are rising, Hermione...in case you haven't noticed, of course."

"Of course!"

The irony brought a smile to her lips for a few seconds, then it disappeared.

They were at the summit of a massive dune, and it was a good observation post. As such, unless you were blind there was no way you could miss the tens of thousands of skeletons surrounding the Black Pyramid in complete silence.

Their banners had long disappeared, and the sands of time had devoured everything but their bones. The only weapons which were not rusted were some antique Khopesh swords, for they had Runes added to the bronze and iron millennia ago.

"To be honest, I really don't care if there are forty thousand or one hundred skeletons guarding this Seal. They are far away from everything."

"The Egyptian military has noticed something is wrong, though," Susan commented.

As if to echo the words of her girlfriend, the noise of machines was heard again, coming from the west. Those were certainly military helicopters.

"Yes. And now that they have noticed, they're likely going to do something stupid. So better to make sure they don't. I know just by looking at it that forcing this Seal to activate its real defensive measures is not something to be desired."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"The problem is that there's too much Death magic saturating this desert. The logical thing to do is disperse it across the world. Look near the first ranks of the army. The overwhelming pressure is awakening things that should have stayed asleep."

"They look a bit like undead jackals, these animals. Are you saying that the Aspect of Egyptian Death is taking over here?"

"No. Because these animals aren't jackals."

Long ago, they had been called Sha, the favourite animal of Set, Egyptian deity of sands, discord, violence, and other unpleasant things.

"Some witches and wizards give hard tests to their Apprentices so they are sure they are worthy of their teachings, but this one is a bit over the top, shall we say?"

"Morag, don't be ridiculous, it is not a test. Making sure I am capable of outmanoeuvring Dumbledore politically is a test. Dealing with the press is a Trial. That? It is an annoyance."

"There's an army of over forty thousand skeletons, Alex."

"Yes," lightning began to dance on her fingertips. "How kind of them to be here today. I've experienced a lot of frustration in the last days. For some reason, it's always 'you can't kill this imbecile', 'don't do that', 'we will oppose this', and more loudmouths pestering me from dawn to dusk."

Alexandra exhaled.

"These skeletons haven't done anything bad recently, but they are going to expiate for everyone else."

"Some part of the Egyptian military are going to be spectators."

"Let them watch." Alexandra smiled. "I am the Champion of Death. I think a lot of men and women need a fresh reminder of what it truly means."

\*\*\*\*

If someone had told the Egyptian pilot one month ago that his daily duties would include flying in the middle of the desert and reassuring his superiors that an army of dead warriors from the time of the Pharaohs hadn't moved from its defensive positions around a Black Pyramid which put the magnificence of the Giza complex to shame, he would have said they were mad.

That was one month ago.

That was before the world suddenly turned mad.

Now? To be honest, there were far worse duties than going on a helicopter tour and monitoring an army that didn't react to your presence as long as you didn't attack them.

How worse? The infantry was supposed to hunt giant snakes, except the monsters didn't cooperate. The last intervention near a prestigious Red Sea Hostel, if the rumour mill was true, had ended in a disaster the higher-ups were doing their best to hide from the civilians of Cairo and the entirety of the Nile.

And the reason it hadn't grown worse was that the 'magicians' were limiting the numbers of the snake monsters. It wouldn't be that bad, if there weren't insistent murmurs about their 'neighbours' wanting to end on top of whatever new society emerged from the chaos.

This was something that was spreading much unease through the ranks, and the pilot was professional enough to admit he really didn't like it and that several nights had been filled with nightmares.

Yes, it was all a very good thing he wasn't assigned to snake-hunting. Helicopters should be fine in the air, of course, but when transporting special forces or other soldiers, you had to land sometimes, and the new terrors of the desert seemed to have a gift for emerging from the sand at the worst possible moment.

"We're five minutes away from the objective. You heard the General. This time we are-"

The world before them disintegrated into a tempest of fire and lightning.

The pilot shouted a litany of insults that no serviceman of the Egyptian Air Force should have uttered when in uniform before regaining his calm.

"What..." regaining control of the helicopter was far easier than retaking control of his wits. For no, the tempest of...magic between his aircraft and the Black Pyramid was not revealed to be an illusion. If anything, it seemed to gain in strength and size. "What is happening here?"

\*\*\*\*

It was nice training until the Styx Vipers revealed themselves.

"*Leave*," the Hydra Animagus hissed in Parseltongue. "*And I will not kill you*."

Predictably, the two giant snakes attacked.

"Fulmen Imperator."

Sometimes, it was good to return to the classics.

Unfortunately, one of the Styx Vipers was far smarter than the other, and used its 'sibling' as an improvised shield. As a result, the lightning battle-spell only downed one out of two opponents.

"Accio antique weapons! Wingardium Leviosa!"

Without a witch or a wizard to protect them, an army of tens of thousands of skeletons was just useless against someone with her skills.

In mere seconds, thousands of weapons were under her command, and then she began to control them mentally.

It was a forest of blades, maces, and various metallic objects.

It was a storm of death.

And it was hers.

The Styx Viper realised it should have taken her offer before, and tried to flee. But it was too late. Many of the obsolete weapons gathered were so fragile they broke with the first blow against the scales of the snake, but the Khopesh enchanted swords and the other weapons shining with hieroglyphs were another matter.

The XXXXX-class monster was cut apart, and Alexandra wasn't going to lie: stabbing it repeatedly with several blades was immensely satisfying.

"Now let's deal with you, bag of bones."

Evidently, the skeletons stopped their silent vigil, and began to march to war the moment the Vipers burst out of the sands.

It wasn't like they couldn't do anything else, of course. There wasn't a single soul imprisoned in these bone remains. There was no self-preservation. There was no acknowledgement that they were completely outmatched.

Alexandra stepped forwards.

"Djet," Alexandra said, and the single world provoked a shockwave, propelling unimaginable quantities of sand. Thousands of bones instantly crumbled to dust.

The bodies of these ancient warriors had stood in a parody of life, but now they were denied the very Power of Death by the voice of its Champion.

There was a reason why for millennia, Necromancers had been even more afraid of the Champions of Death than the Army of Light.

It wasn't sufficient to cripple the entire army in a single attack, alas.

There was still a will animating these skeletons, something that made sure opposition remained, and it wasn't coming from the Black Pyramid.

That said, this was why the Romans had invented battle-spells. It had been a while since she had been able to test some novel Curses and Elemental spells without risking a massive amount of collateral damage; as her powers grew, so did the risk of killing someone by accident.

But this time, the enemies were already dead, and unlike Galahad with Excalibur, it wasn't exactly like they could kill her, no matter how hard they tried.

For what had to be thirty minutes, Alexandra cut loose.

And if the three helicopters observed the show, well, that was their problem, not hers.

There was no banter, just a deep silence.

Behind her, Alexandra could feel Susan and her other friends cast the magics which would prevent these skeletons from rising up ever again.

But the will the Champion of the Morrigan had felt at first?

Oh, this one hadn't departed for the after-life.

It was still there.

It wasn't part of the Black Pyramid.

It was imbuing the sands, and its emotions made it clear it was tied to the Dark.

Alexandra marched up until she was one hundred metres from the entrance of the Black Pyramid before deciding the game had lasted long enough.

"Let's end this. I know you are here."

Silence answered her.

The Ravenclaw Champion made a sound of exasperation.

"Fine, the hard way it is. **Ankh**! **Reveal yourself, Lord of the Red Sands**!"

This time, her command left nothing to chance.

There was a minor earthquake.

And then it was as if a dark cloud had suddenly appeared over the Black Pyramid.

Night came in the middle of the day.

For several seconds, Alexandra had to use every talent of Occlumency she had to repulse a true storm of hatred.

It was not righteous vengeance or the curse of a thousand men targeting their assassins.

It was hatred for the sake of hatred, the venomous fangs of ambition denied.

It was the song of discord, the will of Chaos to make an entire world burn and leave nothing but the ashes.

And finally, it came.

It was the shadow of a shadow, and the Lady Protector understood why Morag and others had mistaken it for Anubis from far away.

But it was not a giant humanoid with a jackal head.

It was not the manifestation of the Ancient Guardian of the Dead the Egyptians had worshipped for millennia.

It was very much an Aspect of **Chaos**, the very being which in ancient tales had murdered Osiris to usurp his throne.

"Your time has not yet come, Lord of the Red Sands. The Trickster is still ascendant."

Yes, she swallowed heavily as red eyes burning with the flames of Hell watched her carefully.

The manifestation was weak, but it had taken a form which was five metres-tall, and hatred poured out of it in waves.

"**I listened to the whispers of Ruin. I began to dream of a Dark Sun**." Set opened a maw which could have terrified most living creatures of this world. "**The rules have changed, little Hydra**."

"I am young, but if you think I am going to let you devastate the Nile delta and everything nearby, you are going to be very disappointed."

Dark laughter answered her.

"**Do you really believe I am going to kneel because you have *his* Shroud**?"

Alexandra didn't bother wasting her saliva. It was a provocation anyway. Chaos bowed to no one, and even if by some exploit you convinced them to do it, betrayal was the most likely thing awaiting you the moment you turned your eyes away.

"***They* didn't even give you the Book of the Dead**." Set commented as if she was a simpleton. "**Yet you come on black wings, ignorant of the ancient customs. But I am a merciful God**."

The last six words were a lie, and anyone ready to believe them might as well cut his own throat to raise the average intelligence of the human species.

"**Bring me *my* Champion, and I will allow you to rule the lands of the Nile that the desert has yet to swallow**."

"Begone, Bringer of Discord. ANKH!"

Laughter echoed in the darkness, but the Lord of the Red Sands' presence dissipated in the next seconds.

The night receded and disappeared.

The Power of Death, which had accumulated for days in this location, exploded and scattered to the four winds.

Alexandra shivered when it caressed her skin.

For a second, she thought...no, it had to be her imagination.

"I hope the Queen will be in the mood to answer a few pointed questions."

The Champion of the Morrigan observed her immediate surroundings, but there was nothing qualifying as a threat.

If there were more Styx Vipers waiting, they were hiding so well her Hydra eyes couldn't find them.

No, there was only the gigantic Black Pyramid left.

The Black Pyramid had a large entrance facing her...and it was not a coincidence.

It was a black abyss waiting for her, and though it was early afternoon, just being near it gave you a horrible sensation simmering in your bones.

"Oh yes, now I have a lot of questions."

And Alexandra turned away, racing back to join her friends.

**28 February 1995, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

It was very late when they returned to the school, their stomachs filled with delicious pizza.

Despite the darkness, the Venetian School was as splendid as ever...though the light rain was a very cold shower, warm cloaks or not.

Their stroll in the Egyptian weather, in many ways, made the winter temperatures worse. Now they were going to think of white sun, beaches, and summer.

Alexandra didn't even blink when Lucrezia appeared ten metres away, protected by a small purple umbrella.

"Well, well...if it isn't my favourite Succubus!"

"My cousin Marinella is going to be so disappointed she isn't your new favourite, with all the help she gave you in the noble art of Cartography."

The Lady Protector gasped theatrically.

"You're right about that. Please keep it a secret, I beg you!"

"Oh, I don't know!" The Champion of Desire smiled for long seconds, and though there were only teeth, not fangs, you couldn't miss the feline grace.

Then it disappeared and seriousness returned at full gallop. The Ravenclaw Champion was handed a letter.

"You would have received the letter a few hours ago, but I understand you had a little problem to deal with. The Judges had summons for every surviving Champion...and the substitutes who are now going to have their chance."

"When?" Alexandra didn't bother trying to open the official message.

"Tomorrow morning, at the Coliseum."

"Ah." With politics and other shenanigans, the Champion of Death had been very busy, but she could add two plus two, thank you very much. And now that she thought about it, there had been no 'Tournament Clue' after Venice. Technically, the Night Court had 'won', but save the artefacts and their own creations, there had been little in the terms of prize money and everything else. "It is that time, again."

"Yes," Lucrezia nodded. "They haven't said it directly, but there's not much doubt left. They're going to inform us what the Fifth Task is about."

**Author's note**:

It is incredibly likely to be one of the last updates of the year, so happy winter holidays everyone! The adventures of Alexandra and her friends will continue in 2024, with a few other epic showdowns...

More links for the story:

On P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

On TV Tropes: ww w. tvtropes pmwiki / pmwiki .php/ Fanfic/ TheOddsWereNeverInMyFavour

Notable addition: The odds were never in my favour is now on Archive of Our Own, link is:

archive of ourown works / 51222748 / chapters / 129428554 (Antony444 is my profile name there too)