**Chapter 81**

**Aborted War**

**10 August 1994,** **Quidditch World Cup area, Dartmoor, England**

Lyre swore that if she survived this night, never again would she trust the ‘perfect security measures’ of the British Ministry.

Honestly, the French pure-blood had known Fudge and his administration were incapable, but she had thought that with international help, they would at least be able to make sure the month-long Quidditch World Cup would be able to happen without incidents. Maybe if the vampires, the goblins, or any other ‘non-human’ race angry with London had decided to present their grievances in front of the international spectators, it would have been more difficult, but the blood-suckers and the bankers had stayed quiet.

For several weeks the Quidditch supporters had been allowed to enjoy the games and celebrate or drink vast quantities of alcohol until Ireland won the final.

And then tonight they were attacked.

There had been no warning, nothing at all to inform them an attack was coming. One minute she was trying to sleep in the Malfoy tent, the next they had been on the receiving end of dozens of Stupefying Charms. Courtesy of her informal Duelling training, she had been able to cast a Reductor Curse before going down...for all the good it had done, since the hastily cast spell had barely hurt the arm of one of their attackers. Lord and Lady Malfoy had done better; they had each taken down one enemy.

The problem, Lyre assessed as the Stupefying effect lost its power and she regained consciousness, was that they were far more than a dozen enemies.

Occlumency helped her keeping her wits, while she was close to panic. Because the situation was bad, very bad.

A wand was pointed right between her eyes, and it sparkled with nasty red-back magic. Judging by the strange shape of the left arm which wasn’t in use, the masked wizard who was only waiting the signal to kill her was the one she had cast her Reducto against.

Then the man moved, though he still kept his wand pointed in direction of her face. Lyre almost snarled, because the intentions of the man were obvious. He wanted her to enjoy the ‘spectacle’, so to speak.

It was...it was awful. The reason she had not been reawakened for several minutes, apparently, was because the Death Eaters – and they had to be Death Eaters, with these masks and these robes – were busy torturing in turn Lucius Malfoy. And two were...well, they were raping Lady Narcissa, forcing her husband to watch.

“You enjoyed a bit too much the good life all these years, eh, Malfoy? Crucio!”

The blonde-haired Lord of House Malfoy screamed as the Torture Curse hit. So far, he had managed to remain silent, but...it was the Cruciatus.

There were many spells which were Unforgivable on British soil that weren’t elsewhere on the continent, Lyre was perfectly aware of that. But the Cruciatus had no other use but torture and the suffering of its victim. It also demanded the caster to enjoy the evil he was doing.

“CRUCIO!”

“CRUCIO!”

Slowly, deliberately, they took turn to cast the Unforgivable spell, maintaining each the torture to atrocious levels for several seconds, making Lucius Malfoy scream as his wife was raped and cursed next to him...and Lyre couldn’t do anything to save them. She couldn’t even save herself; the man was beginning to...touch her. Shivering, she tried to maintain Occlumency shields as best as she could.

The French Heiress had thought she was going to be killed. Her fate was more likely going to be more unpleasant than that.

And Draco all the while...well, Lyre had never had a good opinion of her English cousin, but here he was really proving he was nothing but a coward. His lips were a litany of supplication to his captors, promising everything, anything, fortune, loyalty, brooms, artefacts, as long as they didn’t kill him. And this while he didn’t even have a wand pointed at his throat. No, the Death Eater who was ‘guarding’ him was three feet behind and was playing with two wands.

“CRUCIO!”

Lyre wasn’t religious, but for once she prayed. Prayed that someone would come to save them. Damn it, surely someone in these damned isles would recognise the horrible-looking skull in the skies and the tents burning were merely an impressive distraction.

“CRUCIO!”

“NEMESIS DIFFINDO!”

The right hand of Lucius Malfoy was severed, and his forearm began to turn an ugly purple.

“CRUCIO!”

“WHAT ARE YOU ALL DOING?”

The torture session stopped. The Death Eaters who had been busy...raping Lady Narcissa abandoned her as a new Death Eater ran from the burned tents.

Lyre knew instinctively this one was different. For one, his robes and his mask seemed to ripple with the enchantments they were carrying, and they looked to have seen a lot of use: there were many signs of spell damage which had been repaired over and over again.

This Death Eater was a commander, and certainly the real plan-maker behind the attack.

“Err...Lord-“

“Silence, imbecile! Or are ‘codenames only’ one more thing you have forgotten tonight?”

“We have-“

“You were supposed to attack House Malfoy and kill them, then present their deaths in such a way everybody would know what it cost to them to challenge our Lord! Did you even bother listening to me when I told you the plan?”

“We are-“

“You are amateurs and unworthy to receive the Dark Mark, yes,” the Dark Wizard acknowledged. “Thankfully the Aurors and the sheep have realised just as we planned, allowing me to return to you to see if the work was done. Thankfully, because I have no doubt you would have botched the job and allowed the DMLE to rescue them. The Hit-Wizards will soon investigate here, and I intend to be long gone by then.”

The skull-shaped mask turned towards Lucius Malfoy.

“You should have tried to rescue our Lord, Lucius. He has returned, and death is vanquished.” His wand went on in an executioner’s pose. “For the Dark Lord-“

“There is no escaping death. GLACIAREM DIABOLIS!”

Lyre felt the cold as the first syllable of the incantation was uttered.

The Death Eater commander tried to cast a shield. Before it activated, he received a sword of ice directly in the chest, and as he fell impaled and with blood exploding on his black robes, the enchantments of his clothes had proven completely insufficient.

This enemy was not the only one to fall. The air had turned from summer-like to absolutely glacial, and it was raining ice swords and a gigantic snake of ice went onto the attack.

The Death Eaters were falling right and left. The one threatening her was literally decapitated by another ice sword before he was able to cast anything more than a Crucio...which exploded an ice sword, spreading ice shards on his ‘companions’.

“GLACIAREM DIABOLIS!”

A second snake of ice, a magnificent animal of ice and death shrouded in darkness, was summoned and its fangs closed onto the body of one more Death Eater. The noise was sickening...and when the snake opened its maw, there was just a mass of broken flesh left.

“Escape! Flee! Activate your Portkeys!”

Lyre could have grinned at the evidence that once they faced a serious opponent, these torturers and murderers were exactly like those Alexandra had described: they tried to run away. They hadn’t the spine to truly defend their crimes wand in hand.

But this time there was no escape. The Portkeys weren’t working, and suddenly Lyre realised was the ice was pulsating in a black aura.

It generated an anti-Portkey area effect.

Of course. Glaciarem Diabolis. It had begun as a Norse-invented Curse, for the battle-mages of the Northern seas despised the attitude of their Southern ‘soft’ counterparts to abandon a battle before the outcome had been settled to the bitter-end.

It was very much a curse preventing you from fleeing when things turned sour, and Hrungnir’s Curse had soon known many, many variants like the one just uttered in Latin.

And if Lyre had known it, it was because Alexandra had mentioned it before as one she had the intention to learn. It was very much an incantation of death...and a Dark Arts’ spell.

At the moment, the Slytherin-Sorted witch couldn’t care less about it.

“CRUCIO!”

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Numerous Unforgivables were cast, but the ice engulfed everything. Ice swords were conjured, impaling Death Eaters wherever they ran.

It was not a battle anymore. It had never been one.

Lyre felt the presence of the black-robed figure long before she revealed herself to seize one more ice sword and decapitate a new skull-masked wizard.

And suddenly the battle was over.

One Death Eater was running away in the distance, but there was a flicker from the newcomer’s wand, and an ice sword was levitated and thrown like a magical javelin. The fleeing Dark Wizard received it right through his neck and collapsed immediately.

Alexandra, and it had to be her, few wizards or witches were talented or fast enough to massacre so many enemies at once, stood alone with her.

The ground was littered with dead skull-masked wizards.

“Death Eaters...what a pretentious name.”

The face was hidden by a black hood and an impressive obscuring illusion.

“There are going to be repercussions for tonight.”

Lyre watched her as she turned in her direction, and recognised the message. She would have to give her memories of the battle to the Ministry, and Alexandra could not reveal it was her who was behind this execution of rapists and torturers. If she did, Azkaban was the least of the fates Dumbledore and Fudge would have for her.

Lady Narcissa Malfoy, impossibly, managed to sit up...the ‘seat’ she used was one of her dead tormentors.

“House Malfoy...is in your debt.”

“I will not forget,” Alexandra answered, and truly, her voice was truly cold and dark tonight. “But the Ministry will soon come. I will soon contact you to...settle the debt you owe me.”

And then she walked forwards, as the ice snakes crumbled, before kneeling to grab the Death Eater leader who had been the first to be targeted.

Narcissa Malfoy being busy to cast many healing charms on her husband, there was only Lyre – Draco was alive, but has pissed himself in fear and finally fallen unconscious, perhaps of fright – to be a witness as the skull-shaped mask was severed by a shield-breaking Severing Charm.

Astonishingly, the man was still alive when his face was revealed to them.

“Lord Yaxley...” Alexandra was the first to recognise him, of course.

“You don’t know...who you’ve challenged tonight.”

“On the contrary,” Alexandra stood, and her voice regained some humour. “Tell me. Is it ‘Flight From Death’, or ‘Deathwing’ that your Lord intended to use as a war name? Because if it’s the latter, in French I am sorry to inform you it’s ‘Aile-de-Mort’, not ‘Vol-de-Mort’.”

Lyre had what little doubt remain about the identity of her saviour vanish. Yes, it was definitely Alexandra. Her French accent was...eminently recognisable.

The wounded Lord Yaxley didn’t rise to the bait. Then again, given how deathly white he looked, he didn’t have more than a few minutes before him.

“You will pay for this.”

“Your House will pay first,” Alexandra retorted. “You presence here tonight means that allowing to let House Yaxley stands is a favour to the so-called ‘Lord Voldemort’. So, congratulations, Death Eater. I know where Yaxley Manor is, and I know how many of your line live. When the next dawn will rise, each and every one of your cousins and blood relatives will be dead.”

And somehow, Lyre didn’t think a single second it was a bluff. Hell, it was going to be...a solution of sorts to the ‘Scylla Yaxley’ problem. If there was no House Yaxley to want her dead, the girl born as Ginny Weasley would not be challenged in her claims, not by those possessing Yaxley blood at least.

“My Lord...will kill you.”

“One does not escape death eternally, Lord Yaxley. Cremare Horrendus.”

And a jet of flames burst into existence, one coalescing black and green flames in a single curse.

Alexandra had really decided to test her new Dark Arts’ spells tonight, didn’t she?

“Farewell.”

Lord Yaxley screamed and began to beg for mercy. Somehow, Lyre didn’t think it was a coincidence the cursed flames had been directed at the lower part of his legs and his feet.

He was going to die very, very slowly.

And Lyre had no problem with that, even as she began to slowly cease her use of Occlumency.

Even as her eyes filled with tears and sobs took control of her mouth, as all the panic of the last hour filled her heart, lungs, and brain, the French pure-blood felt utterly gleeful at the fact the man was burning agonisingly slowly for what he had engineered tonight.

Lady Narcissa Malfoy cried.

Lyre cried.

The world seemed to be crying and despair seemed to engulf everything.

They told her days later she was still crying incoherently when the Aurors finally arrived at the scene of the battlefield – more than ten minutes too late.

**12 August 1994, Ministry of Magic, London, England**

“This is a complete and unmitigated disaster.”

Albus Dumbledore agreed without reservation with Rufus Scrimgeour. If it wasn’t, he wouldn’t be here at all. His travels across Europe and especially in Spain lately had taken a lot of his time, and he also had to deal with the extensive parchment-writing which came with a massive event such as the European Magical Tournament. He had to teach the young generation of future Leaders of the Light what they needed to survive the dark times ahead.

And judging by what they knew of the aftermath of the Quidditch World Cup, ‘disaster’ was exactly the appropriate definition.

“If this is a disaster, it is because someone did not do his job!”

Trust Fudge to try to divert the blame when everyone knew he was guilty.

“Minister,” the ageing Director of the DMLE began. “Save the Aurors and the Hit-Wizards, there were exactly three Portkeys created before the Ireland-Bulgaria final which could give the ability to someone to ignore the anti-Portkey wards. One of them was with me, and I didn’t touch it or inform anyone I had it on my person. The second belonged to Director Crouch,” the Director of International Magical Cooperation nodded grimly, “and he has just confirmed that like me, there was no instance that required its use or informing anyone else he had it in his pocket. That leaves yourself, Minister. So for the last time, who,” the voice of Scrimgeour was anger and disgust intertwined, “have you given your Portkey before the final?”

“I told you before,” Cornelius Fudge was sweating so much the water created from it was soon going to become a minor river in its own right, Albus admitted. “I lost it in the panic provoked by the Dark Mark! My tent was burned too with most of my camping possessions! No doubt the Portkey shared their fate!”

Albus knew to recognise liars, from its long experience with quantities of mischievous pranksters and troublemakers at Hogwarts. He also had Legilimency and several other ‘esoteric’ skills to tell when someone was trying to sell him a swamp for the price of a gold mine.

They weren’t necessary there. Fudge was lying, and he was lying badly.

The Minister had a motive to see the Malfoys dead. Without the Lord and Lady of their House, and likely their son in the claws of one of the senior Death Eaters once again executing the orders of Voldemort, the trial against Fudge that House Malfoy pursued with all celerity would have been unavoidably cancelled.

Fudge’s head would be saved. He would be able to present himself to the next election and continue to live the high life he was accustomed to.

It was brilliant and ruthless...as long as you were focused on the first move of the game, of course.

And as Crouch spoke, the reason why it was short-sighted was explained in all its awful and ugly reality.

“I don’t believe you, and even if I did,” Bartemius gave the Minister a sour look, “it wouldn’t matter. The ICW wants blood after this disaster. Tens of thousands of tents and camping possessions have been vandalised and destroyed. The lawyers have just begun their work, but I have no doubt the price for this night of terror will be in the millions of Galleons. Millions, Minister. And since between seven and eight spectators out of ten were foreigners, we will have to find the gold and the silver to reimburse these wizards and witches to the last Knut.”

Fudge clasped his hands and looked at them nervously. Yes, he had definitely not thought about the consequences of potential incidents of this magnitude, hadn’t he?

“Surely...surely there is someone else who must pay for these distressing sums?”

“Who?” Rufus Scrimgeour asked bitterly – and Albus assumed, completely rhetorically. “The foreign Ministries themselves? Not likely. By treaty, they temporarily transferred to us the security of their wizards and witches, and we proved unable to fulfil our part of the bargain.”

“What about House Yaxley itself?” Fudge answered very seriously. Even Albus, who had had his moment of cynical propositions in the past, felt like a punch in the belly at the blatant disregard of the Minister for the man who had undoubtedly been his Death Eater’s contact.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts admitted it changed everything. He was going to have to use what was left of his influence in the Wizengamot to throw out Fudge as fast as it was legally possible. The man couldn’t be authorised to keep his post a month longer. Albus was willing to tolerate some things from the Minister of Magic, but not a Death Eater pact, and not this kind of behaviour.

“House Yaxley is not yet dead,” Scrimgeour informed them, and Albus blinked in surprise. Truly this was a day filled with revelations.

“Ridiculous!” Fudge blustered. “The Lord of the House, his cousins, one of your Senior Aurors, and everyone we know which bears the name has been found dead! The line is extinguished!”

“I can only tell you what the goblins told me in their official letter when I tried to start the procedure of House extinction,” Rufus retorted coldly. Evidently on his part too, he felt no need to be respectful to Fudge anymore. “Someone will have access to the Yaxley vaults or has already been granted access to them, the goblins were their usual charming selves giving us vital information. What I felt relatively certain is that we won’t get a Knut from them.”

“And that’s not even touching the Malfoys,” Crouch remarked, his grim expression becoming...grimmer. “The cost of tents and a night of fear are expensive, but we could minimise it, at the price of emptying the Ministry budget. But there are no agreed limits to the kind of savagery which was perpetrated against Lord Lucius and his wife. They are going to ask an astronomic amount of gold for the attack they were the victims of. Millions of Galleons, most likely. We were responsible for their security, and we were unable to arrive in time to matter.”

Albus admitted, for the twelfth or thirteenth time this morning, that it would have been far better for everyone if the Malfoys had died that night, himself included. But after one day and one night at Saint Mungo’s, it appeared even Lucius Malfoy was going to survive...without a hand and most likely suffering the physical consequences of being on the receiving end of so many Cruciatus Curses. It was, admittedly, far from a perfect outcome. The man’s mind had always been more dangerous than his Duelling abilities, and now he would have only them to weigh in politics. No, no one in this room or in Wizarding Britain had any reason to cheer at that medical report.

“And what about the Dark Witch which killed the Death Eaters? Surely we can sue her, no?”

Fudge was in a crisis of sweating, and very close to panic. Of course, being the Minister who completely bankrupted Britain would make him very unpopular among the public...not that the night of the Quidditch World Cup had not already destroyed plenty of its credibility.

“Apart that we haven’t the first clue of who she or he is, you mean?” Crouch was prompt to snap at his ‘superior’.

“Bartemius is right,” the DMLE Director confirmed. “The Aurors have reviewed the memory provided by Heir Draco Malfoy – and we are going to pay thousands of Galleons in fine to Lyre de Male-Foi for your stupid ‘obligation to assist the Ministry’, by the way – and we don’t even know for sure the sex of the person who massacred Yaxley and his accomplices. Merlin’s beard, we don’t even know if it is a human or a magical construct or a vampire.”

“If it’s all you can do as an investigator, I should find another DMLE Director,” Fudge threatened arrogantly.

Scrimgeour faced him emotionlessly.

“My Aurors and my DMLE investigators have all evidence required to know the Portkeys on the Death Eaters’ corpses were extremely similar in magical signature to the one you were given, *Minister*.”

Fudge scowled...and then left his seat to storm out of the room, in a precipitated run where anger and panic coexisted.

“Good riddance,” Ludo Bagman commented. “That said, I think he raised an interesting question, even if by accident.”

“Which is?”

“How the hell does a single wizard manage to kill twenty-eight Death Eaters in less than three minutes when most of our Aurors died one-on-one against these killers during the previous wars?”

Bagman’s question, for once, was actually pretty reasonable.

“First above all, there weren’t really Death Eaters,” Rufus Scrimgeour was prompt to explain. “Most of the Dark Marks on their forearms were actually incomplete, like that night was supposed to be the mission that would see them inducted into the ranks of the Dark Lord’s servants. Since they completely screwed up what Yaxley wanted them to do, I doubt they would have become members of the Inner Circle within the month.”

A quick Summoning Charm, and the ‘Old Lion’ drank a glass of Firewhiskey before continuing.

“Second...it appears Voldemort, if he indeed has returned, can’t count upon the quality of recruits he was used to in the last war. There were no elite Durmstrang students, no battle-experienced mercenaries of note, and no Dark Wizards already having bloodied their hands here in Britain or elsewhere in the world. Five of the dead have already been confirmed to be small criminals dabbling from time to time in Dark Magic. Two of those went to Azkaban for short prison sentences in the past. I should have more information by this evening, but I would be very surprised if the majority were not the same: criminals who have recently find a powerful ‘patron’ to teach them to cast the Unforgivables. They certainly weren’t bright, and their fighting abilities were well below Aurors. If they hadn’t gotten their hands on Portkeys and a first group of Death Eaters wasn’t playing the role of distraction, my Aurors would have beaten them easily.”

“Fighting and stalling more than three or four opponents alone and unsupported remains the kind of ‘exploit’ a lot of wizards love to boast about,” Albus said in an unamused tone, “but I can assure you that doing it is far more difficult than it appears. And winning a duel outnumbered so badly is certainly...cause for grave concerns. Wizard or witch, this Dark ‘rescuer’ was not fighting first-year students here, but adult wizards having received basic instruction in the Unforgivables.”

“True enough,” Scrimgeour agreed. “But he or she got them with their pants down...in the case of three of them, literally.” The man’s face scowled, and Albus grimaced. He had to admit no one deserved rape, not even a Dark Witch like Narcissa Malfoy. “Two of them were likely already in no shape to fight, courtesy of Lord and Lady Malfoy. In fact, this might be what pushed these aspirant Death Eaters to torture and ignore their orders in the first place. And now that we have the memories of the fight, we know Lord Yaxley, who was the leader and the battle-experienced coordinator, was defeated before he could do anything.”

“That still left twenty-five of them,” Ludo Bagman pointed out.

“Which did little to nothing to these bastards,” in case one forgot, Rufus wasn’t the great admirer of the Death Eaters. “And they were unfamiliar with the Blizzard’s Lament. Though they can’t be blamed for that, most of my Aurors didn’t know what this spell was either.”

“I had heard of the incantation’s name,” Albus admitted, “but little more than that, apart that it’s one of the creative innovations developed by a Norwegian Dark Lord, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Swedish, actually,” Scrimgeour smiled thinly before shaking his head. “It was one of most versatile spells of ice magic ever invented in the eleventh century, but it’s ridiculously complicated to master, and of course one it falls into the ‘Death Magic’ category of the Dark Arts. Translated in English, it is called the Blizzard’s Lament though the Scandinavians have more...original and terrifying names for it.”

“Is it that complicated to cast?” Bartemius Couch said disapprovingly. “The mysterious saviour of the Malfoys seemed to use it three times in as many minutes.”

“Complicated and magically exhausting,” Scrimgeour met the glare of the man who had once been in his seat as DMLE Director without flinching. “I’ve spoken with two Swedish specialists of elemental spells, and they confirmed that to create an amount of ice like the one the Death Eater-killer used, your magical core must be at a Beta-level and maybe more.”

Albus caressed his beard in contemplation. He may have missed a few things these last months, but Beta-level was best known as Lord-level, and there were not thousands of people able to reach these mighty heights.

Death Magic was even rarer. And while elemental magic was often brutally effective, not many wizards and witches in the world were willing to learn spells in that field.

The Defeater of Grindelwald wasn’t an investigator, but he knew of the Hogwarts’ students who was the Champion of Death and had absolutely no reluctance in slaughtering whoever stood in her way. She was no friend of the Death Eaters either, the Chamber of Secrets had proven this beyond doubt. And she had become infamous for using obscure and little known elemental spells.

“Per chance, was Alexandra Potter confirmed to be present at the Quidditch World Cup?”

Bagman began to laugh.

“Dumbledore, come on, don’t be ridiculous, the girl isn’t-“

He didn’t even need to tell the ex-Beater to stop talking; the man did it on its own and his words were swallowed by his throat.

Scrimgeour grimaced.

“Are you sure your...feud with the girl isn’t making you seeing things where they aren’t Dumbledore? I will check, but I don’t remember the Potter Heiress to be among the list of ‘powerful witches’ confirmed to be present for the Cup final.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“A powerful opponent using forbidden elemental magic, slaughtering Death Eaters without any kind of restraint, and her conjurations take the shape of swords. The massacre is conducted in a brutal and terribly efficient manner.”

Although unlike Fudge, there was the problem of-

“The problem is that she has no motive,” Crouch intervened. “And while it is possible a person might have had the time to Apparate at the edge of the wards, run towards the place where the Malfoys were tortured, and kill these scum...all of this would require being aware there is an attack in the first place. This is true no matter who the ‘mysterious saviour’ is. No one in our services knew there was an attack in the first place, and it happened in the middle of the night. I don’t know about you Albus, but even when I’m ready, I’m hardly ready to fight in the next ten minutes, and that’s the time-frame we’re talking about.”

Albus would have approved...if he didn’t know the Black Witch had laughed to his face and revealed she suffered from *insomnia*. If warned sufficiently early, she might have still been awake and ready to fight...though it raised frightening questions.

Albus didn’t remember out of hand the location of Zabini Manor where the Black Witch was a guest, but it had to be in Southern England. If it was truly her who had intervened, that meant the Death Champion was capable to Apparate to Dartmoor in a single step, massacre the Death Eaters with a combination of Blizzard’s Lament, kill Lord Yaxley with the spell called the Legion’s Ashes, and then go hunting the rest of House Yaxley so that, in her own words ‘no Yaxley lived by dawn’. And then obviously return to her guardian’s manor without anyone being able to testify of her crimes.

The old Headmaster was no stranger to some of his students achieving mighty deeds, but here it stopped being funny and plunged into the ‘frightening’ category. He could have done the same thing, and his Heads of House minus Sprout could have imitated these actions, though using less costly and impressive magical spells.

But there were fewer than ten wizards in Britain who could have done the same. Apparition on long-distance was exhausting, and fighting at this level was tiring.

The threat level it represented...

“I admit I see no motive,” Albus Dumbledore was forced to reluctantly concede. Past the salvation, there were enormous advantages in having House Malfoy in your favour, but no one could have guessed the Dark Mark wasn’t a distraction at the beginning. And at the best of his knowledge, Lily Potter’s damned spawn didn’t have any friends in Slytherin House. In fact, Draco Malfoy was one of the students all Ravenclaws were regularly professing their disgust of.

And unfortunately, motive or not, he still needed a lot of evidence more grounded than ‘yes, she could have done it because the attack is similar to something she once did’. That might fly for a lone idiot who had zero support in the Wizengamot, but for the Black Witch, it was too little.

Dumbledore hoped he was wrong. Maybe it wasn’t Alexandra Potter who had butchered twenty-five Death Eaters, along with the twelve remaining members of House Yaxley.

Few adults could organise something like this, never mind improvise that well on the instant.

It wasn’t her.

It couldn’t be her.

But if she was guilty...it meant a lot of plans he had been relying upon were void and null.

And he may have wasted too much time on trivial issues while a dangerous threat grew unchecked.

“So,” Bagman bared his teeth. “Any brilliant idea to make sure the ICW doesn’t declare us a nation of outlaws tomorrow?”

“Not to mention,” Scrimgeour imitated him, “we need more solutions to avoid bankruptcy within the year...”

**13 August 1994, Bones Manor, England**

Alexandra hadn’t expected her efforts into organising her ‘birthday party’ would be beaten so soon. Of course, she hadn’t expected Susan to really invite what had to be the entirety of House Hufflepuff.

By itself, it was already a considerable group of young witches and wizards – the new generations which had begun school in 1992 and 1993 were huge compared to her year-mates, and Hufflepuff was always welcoming into its ranks plenty of boys and girls. Many Gryffindors and Slytherins could mock the Badgers all they wanted, but the spiritual descendants of Helga Hufflepuff were quite numerous, and if they weren’t the most courageous, the most politically wise, or the most bookish, so what?

They did everything in groups. And last but not least, they knew how to party.

“Maybe they should reedit *Hogwarts: A History*,” Alexandra said seriously to Daphne Greengrass, who had also been invited today to Bones Manor. “I mean, the book say the cunning go to Slytherin – which is a bit erroneous now I think about it – the Gryffindor claim the brave, the Ravenclaw the wise, and the Hufflepuff the loyal. But they don’t mention how the Hufflepuff enjoy having fun and celebrating.”

“They must have tried once to write it,” the blonde-haired Heiress smiled. “And then the next Sorting, two-thirds of the students must have gone to Hufflepuff and much partying was done for the next seven years. So they modified the books again and sworn the ghosts to silence.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me,” Alexandra nodded, “is that why the Fat Friar is always interrupted before having the opportunity to make his full recruitment speech?”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” her partner in Rune projects said carefully. “It seems so long ago we were waiting our Sorting.”

“Yes, a lot of things happened in three years,” the Potter Heiress agreed. A lot of great things, like her friends. And also a lot of nightmarish things and monsters revealed one by one. A lot of illusions had been broken under the ruthless shoes of the Light and the Dark.

The good outweighed the bad this summer though...no matter how much murderous Dark Lords wanted to change that.

“How by Merlin’s sceptre did you manage to enchant an invisibility cape as a present for Susan anyway?” Daphne hissed in a low voice.

The green-eyed Champion giggled.

“Your faith in my abilities is touching, Daphne, but I am not that gifted in Enchanting. I purchased the materials, and cast a few basic enchantments on it, but a lot of the job was done by an Enchanter on the continent.”

Also known as her vampire mother, but it was going to stay her little secret, with only her guardian for now being aware of it, since she had to have an adult on hand to check the final work on the cape.

“I am good in Charms, but I am a complete novice in Enchanting.” The Basilisk-Slayer admitted. “It sounds really fascinating, but it’s also very complicated.”

“Ah. I thought for a moment you had decided to begin a career as an Enchantress and not told anyone.”

Alexandra clicked her tongue.

“I admit, I have not settled on what I want to do after Hogwarts. My priorities change so fast year after year...” Her voice trailed off for a few seconds. “I admit, being an Enchantress is a seducing step.”

It also very much meant following her mother’s footsteps, and in terms of morality, it was not something she was sure she wanted to emulate.

“But there are plenty of other respectable professions out there.”

“Yes, Monster-Hunter for example.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. Daphne, you’re hilarious today.”

Susan at the other end of the table opened another present, this one a complete collection of sweets and prank items, under loud applauses and cheers.

“If you have finished with Heiress Potter, Heiress Greengrass, could I borrow her from you for a brief conversation?”

“Of course, Regent Bones. She’s all yours.”

Alexandra gave Daphne a glance promising a humorous retribution, before following Susan’s aunt.

They did not walk away for long, merely the length of two rooms, which Alexandra knew wasn’t one-fifth of the width of this Manor. The ancestral home of the Bones was not as palatial as Zabini Manor, nor was it as lively when there wasn’t a small army of Hufflepuffs invited, but it was nonetheless big and well-furnished.

The moment the former DMLE Director began to cast temporary privacy wards, Alexandra knew it was exactly to be the kind of discussion the Black Widow had warned her against this morning after her physical work-out.

“Heiress Potter,” the older witch wasn’t smiling or showing any of the fond expressions she had when in the presence of the other Hogwarts students. “I will be particularly blunt. After reviewing the memories of the Quidditch World Cup incident-“

“The battle of the Quidditch World Cup, you mean.” Alexandra interrupted her. Yes, it wasn’t polite. “When Dark Wizards attack a peaceful meeting of wizards and witches, the law enforcement are caught completely off guard, and non-magical and magical civilians are on the receiving end of Unforgivables...we are far, far past an ‘incident’. This imbecile of Voldemort is back, and this was his declaration of war.”

Amelia Bones seemed to fight a smile as she finished speaking.

“You’re opposing his cause, then?”

Alexandra raised an eyebrow at the Regent of House Bones.

“Regent Bones, you’re a powerful witch, and you have an excellent memory. You know what I have done to the young generation of Death Eaters at the end of my second year. I made House Rosier extinct among many other exploits. I killed two Basilisks that the ‘Heir of Slytherin’ would have undoubtedly tried to use if he was able to have access to Hogwarts. I must have ruined dozens of plans and contingencies, not to mention cost him millions of Galleons. I’m not going to say I am target number one or two of the resurrected Dark Lord. This honour, I think we can agree, belongs to Neville Longbottom and Albus Dumbledore. Lucius Malfoy and his family are certainly target three given how they were targeted. I should not be far too behind.”

“And it does not worry you?”

Once upon a time, it would have. But in the last years, immortal and legendary enemies had really become the norm, and at the Quidditch World Cup, Lord Yaxley, a supposed ‘veteran’ of the Death Eaters, had really gone down too easily for her to be afraid of the ‘Death Eater elite’. Granted she had used an ice spell which was Dark Magic, but she was far, far but a master in its casting. The Norse were rumoured to cast towns and battlefield in a single incantation, and it had taken her twice to eliminate a band of idiots. Obviously Yaxley had been taken by surprise...but then the three members of his family she had caught in Death Eater robes at Yaxley Manor had not that excuse, and the same spell had eliminated them in one move.

Was she really that powerful, or the Death Eaters were that weak?

Alexandra stared at the aunt of her girlfriend.

“This isn’t the question you want to ask, Regent Bones.”

Amelia Bones nodded slowly.

“I suppose it isn’t, true. Let’s be more honest with each other, then. Albus Dumbledore openly said in front of all the Department Heads who matter he thought you were responsible for the ‘Death Eater massacre’ the *Daily Prophet* is so busy criticising the Ministry about.”

Was the ‘Light Lord’ was that good at piercing the clues of her presence, her style so recognisable, or his anger against her fixed on the right target for the wrong reasons?

“It’s a dangerous accusation. I really hope he’s not trying to imitate Heir Black. I would hate diverting him from a few million Galleons.”

That at least, was a complete lie. If Albus Dumbledore wished to fund her war effort and her lifestyle, who was she to refuse such generous expensive gifts? Plus every time they tried that, what she lost in unsure supporters, the Light lost in reliability and credibility. After all, was the evidence inexistent, or were the wands of the Order of Phoenix so powerless to fail to act against her?

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Heiress Potter.” Susan’s aunt said, a heavy dose of warnings in her voice. “I have seen the memories of his first duel with Grindelwald.”

“And I have seen the memories of his second duel against the German Dark Lord, Regent Bones.” The raven-haired Ravenclaw allowed herself a tiny smirk. “He’s not as fast or trained as he was in 1945, that much I’m confident. His Transfiguration spells are even more accurate and elaborated than they were fifty years ago, but Dumbledore’s has not spent his Headmaster career pushing the limits of his body and his magical mastery.”

If he had, Alexandra could recognise Dumbledore would have been a true Titan of Magic, one only decades of ageing and extensive practise plus mastery in multiple fields would have allowed her to stand a chance against.

Or as the denomination went in important Wizarding circles, he would have been Caesar. Kaiser. Emperor. Imperator. The name European civilisation had given to the Alpha-level wizards and witches based upon one of the most dangerous and power-hungry Roman wizards before the Statute of Secrecy erased most of his true history.

“Have you slaughtered the Death Eaters at the World Cup, and if yes, why?”

The Champion of the Morrigan sighed.

“Hypothetically, if I answered yes to your question...I would say saving Lyre de Male-Foi counted far more to my eyes than the survival of the rest of House Malfoy.”

She certainly wouldn’t have cried at their death. Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy had been Death Eaters or at the very least active supporters of Voldemort in the past, and their son Draco was worse in nearly all aspects. The battle at the World Cup had definitely proved that.

“I see. And House Yaxley?”

“Hypothetically,” Alexandra smiled. “It served my ambitions and certainly removed one Voldemort-loyal House from the board.”

Scylla had certainly not complained at receiving the ‘birthday present’ that were all the Yaxley vaults.

Praise the goblins for enforcing money law to the bitter end, no matter who opposed them.

This time it was the turn of the Bones Regent to sigh.

“I completely approve your destruction of these skull-masked terrorists and the fact they won’t touch a woman ever again like they acted against Narcissa Malfoy,” when she was deadly serious, Susan had really the same steely eyes as her aunt. “But Dumbledore isn’t going to forget, and past the legal protection afforded by the Tournament, he’s going to move against you.”

“Hypothetically,” Alexandra said for the third time, “he may find out by summer 1995 that he has waited for far too long to deal with me.”

As her duels with Flitwick had proved, she still had a lot to learn about magic and fighting with it. But Dumbledore was considerably slower when he duelled an opponent, and no matter what happened this year, she would find out how to neutralise a Phoenix this year.

With her Hydra abilities, she could handle a lot of punishment, even with Dumbledore fighting her at full power.

“Hum. Very well, you can continue your relationship with my nice for this school year.”

Ah, music for her ears...

**15 August 1994, former Peverell lands, somewhere in Scotland**

“The location is rather...interesting,” Morag said after clearing her throat.

“I think the word you wanted to use was ‘sinister’.” Alexandra replied.

“I am not going to use ‘charming’ for sure,” the Irish redhead told her.

Alexandra grunted wordlessly in approval. She had begun her search of a new location to build up ‘New Potter Manor’ by demanding to Grimjaw the list of available Peverell properties to purchase.

Surprisingly, the answer had been ‘all of them’, or near enough to not matter.

After seeing a few of the properties – or what remained of them – it was mostly unsurprising that nobody tried to raze the ruins. The stones and the ruined tower in front of them were definitely unpleasant to look at.

That much hadn’t bothered Alexandra before and it didn’t bother her now; not when she wanted to raze or remove the last stones and build something far better in its place.

But the very land seemed ill around the stones and the abandoned structures indicating there had once been a human presence in this part of the British Isles.

It felt like the fortress of Dol Guldur imagined by Tolkien, except there was no Sauron hiding there. And yes, she had checked before making this assumption.

“This is the third domain we have found which is in this state, Alex. What by Morgana’s sorcery did the Peverells do to this land and their properties?”

“I don’t know, but like you, I don’t like it at all.” The Basilisk-Slayer sent a tiny pulse of her magic through the stones, and felt only a shadow of decay and something ill-tasting.

“Are you sure they weren’t Champions of Death in this family?”

The green-eyed sword of the Morrigan chuckled.

“Morag, you know very well the only thing the Morrigan can reveal to be without inciting other ‘revelations’ in the rank of other Powers is the identity of my predecessors in Her service.” The Morrigan was only one Aspect of the Power of Death, fortunately or unfortunately. The moment the Celtic-worshipped Goddess wasn’t ‘in the game’, so to speak, its knowledge of the Champions both sides fielded in their millennia-old feuds became limited. “I know the Peverells weren’t Champions of the Morrigan, and they weren’t opponents of them either.”

“That leaves...a lot of possibilities.”

“Indeed,” Alexandra narrowed her eyes. “Though if they really contracted an Aspect of Death, as Champion or by another method, they really did something wrong before their extinction.”

“There is a tale,” Morag said conversationally. “Of three brothers meeting Death at one wrong turn of the road.”

The Heiress of House Potter coughed in disbelief.

“I will admit I am not the most knowledgeable Champion of Death or former Champion to walk upon this world,” this ‘honour’ certainly belonged to the half-sister of King Arthur, courtesy of being over fifteen hundred years old. “But the methods I was told or I learned by myself to plead my cause to the Morrigan don’t involve ‘taking the wrong path’ or ‘not walking under a ladder’. If you want to converse with an Aspect of Death without being chosen to be its Champion, you’d better begin by slaughtering a lot of beings that the Aspect feels for historical reasons great enmity against.”

“That sounds...oddly specific.”

“The Morrigan really hated the Knights of the Round Table, and this enmity has been transferred to their successors of the Army of Light.”

Last time she had crossed into Pandemonium, Alexandra had even been outright informed that a significant power boost awaited if she managed to exterminate root and branch the entire organisation of the bigots who had done their best to kill her at the Battle of Hogsmeade.

“Though it’s always possible they were Champions of Death who screwed up, the other options are different Champions of the Dark were after them and cursed what their owned so deeply the stones and the earth were contaminated.”

“It would take a very powerful Champion of another Power to do that.” Morag said after a second of hesitation. “Shouldn’t we have heard of him or her in the historical books we buy?”

“A lot of what is in the most recent books is often censored or just plain unreliable today. Many of the best libraries were torched after the Statute was cast and the magical and non-magical worlds were separated.”

The Ravenclaw Champion wasn’t going to pretend it had all been roses and sunshine before that, but for some reason, erasing every trace of the magical societies had not improved the ‘sides’ created by it.

“Okay, let’s depart this field of ruins. Unless you intend to buy it for yourself?”

“Oh no,” her pure-blood friend gave her a haughty smile. “House MacDougal has far more class than that.”

“Glad to hear it...”

The two Ravenclaw girls turned back and went to descend the small hill where the Peverells had once decided to build their home. Despite it being quite sunny, the feeling of something unnatural having happened here remained.

“What are we doing to do about the Death Eaters?” the third potential replacement for Champion of House Ravenclaw asked.

“I don’t know. I need more information.” The young black-haired witch passed a hand in her hair. “I have only one certainty: save Blaise, the Champion of House Slytherin and his substitutes will need to die, and as quickly as possible. I was willing to ignore Warrington and his acolytes for the duration of the Tournament, but now that their friends have tried to kill Lyre and provoked a major international incident, they need to be removed. Permanently.”

“I won’t say it is impossible...” Morag spoke. “But it is still four boys and there are only seven tasks.”

Alexandra snorted.

“Only? Morag, have you watched the same preliminaries with us?”

“Enough to know that Snape will certainly provide them help the moment they’re out of their depth.”

“Hogwarts teachers are not forbidden to tutor the Champions from the moment the Tournament begins but they have classes to teach at Hogwarts, you know,” the Headmasters and Headmistresses were forbidden to place themselves into tutoring positions; it was likely a rule to forbid someone – no names would be mentioned – to favour one Champion over the three others at the same school. “They are needed at Hogwarts; their involvement during the year will necessarily be restricted to individual lessons.”

Officially, at least. If Headmasters or teachers were caught red-handed violating the few written rules, the Champion involved would lose points and prestige, and the Headmaster would have to pay a lot of gold in fines.

“And when it comes down to it, even if Snape could help them without any restriction, the man is a Potion Master, a Dark Arts erudite...and a poor teacher. Total dedication or not, I don’t think he can solve every problem the Slytherins will face.”

There were reasons Alexandra learned far better with Professor Slughorn than the ‘dungeon bat’, as the Gryffindors called him, and it wasn’t entirely because the former Head of Slytherin was without defaults. It was also that Snape was an adept of the ‘sink or swim’ mentality, and wasn’t a pleasant man when you exchanged words with him.

“I suppose I am going to wait and see what happens in the first task. If Warrington is forced to fight Lyudmila Romanov, one problem will be solved by the time they announce the scores...”

**25 August 1994, Headquarters of the Soul Drinkers Coven, London**

“My best wishes of recovery to your sister.”

“Thank you,” Bellatrix Black answered after a slim nod. “She is...well, she is alive and able to recover. It helps the animals which assaulted and raped her didn’t survive. No point focusing on corpses, after all.”

“How pragmatic of you,” the female vampire said with a large smile full of fangs. “And her husband?”

“Lucius fared far, far worse, of course,” the ex-Death Eater grimaced. “The hired killers of Yaxley tortured him with too many Cruciatus Curses for it to be otherwise. For their stupidity, their attackers were told how to cast Unforgivable in order to avoid magical backlash. And past a certain point, unless you’re having a natural immunity on par with dragons and other magical creatures, there’s simply nothing that can protect you against this torture. Lucius is going to need months of recovery, and a first-rate prosthesis for his arm.”

Artemis didn’t argue, not with one woman who was an expert with this spell.

“My spies told me he had only lost his hand.”

“The butchers cursed him with a spell we’re still trying to indentify,” Bellatrix shrugged, “personally, I think it’s the result of casting a Dark Severance spell gone wrong, but I could be mistaken. Anyway, by the time the Healers of Saint Mungo’s were able to work on him, there was no salvaging of the arm.”

“It is...sub-optimal.” Having the ‘official’ spokesman of one of the ‘Dark’ factions at the Wizengamot out of the game for months – assuming he recovered from the torture and the missing limb – was not good for their plans, be they those of Artemis’ Coven or the wizards and witches following Bellatrix.

“Charming understatement,” Bellatrix snorted. “And it could have been much, much worse. While I am in charge of the military side, a great deal of our political, economic, and military base depends on my sister and her husband. If they had been killed that night, Voldemort would have likely been able to force every dissenter and defector back in line again. As it is, even with House Yaxley slaughtered and most of his recruits lying dead, I am sure several troublemakers have rallied him.”

“Not Houses Crabbe and Goyle, surely?”

“No, our vassals know better than to cross us...though if Narcissa had died with the rest of her family, I’m sure they wouldn’t have waited a week before donning their masks and kneeling again. I’m however certain that men like Thorfinn Rowle, Nathaniel Nott, and Walden Macnair have renewed their Allegiance Oaths...that is if they weren’t the ones to help him return in the realm of the living in the first place. We might also see soon Amycus and Alecto Carrow by their sides.”

Artemis Cassius would be lying to tell it was nice to have these killers once again at large in the British Isles. Unlike many wizards, she had had the displeasure to meet every name just mentioned more than once, and it was never a pleasant experience. Most were bigoted to the point of refusing to believe anything without a wand could be their equal, and that was one of their less problematic flaws.

“These reinforcements won’t bring him much gold, though. Macnair was never wealthy, and his...activities have made sure his pockets have more bronze than gold available,” Bellatrix developed absently. “Rowle and the Carrows were in exile for the last decade, and their properties and vaults were lost after Halloween 1981. Nott is a problem, unfortunately. While he has experienced enough financial difficulties to make him believe the current status quo is unsatisfying, he’s still a Lord of the Wizengamot and has certainly been in contact with Lords Warrington and Montague.”

“I can’t say I’m happy to hear this.” Artemis admitted. “I would have hoped the...ruined entrance at the Quidditch World Cup would have delayed his plans.”

“Oh it delayed his plans...I’m sure it even ruined totally a lot of them,” the black-haired former Lady Lestrange smirked. “While some old warriors have fond memories of the battles where they fought Aurors and Order of the Phoenix, the new generation wasn’t so convinced in the first place. They *could* have been amazed at this strategy if the Dark Lord had won a one-sided victory, it might have been different, but...”

“He created an international incident and most of the wizards involved are dead.”

“The former may hurt far more than the latter,” the former Lieutenant of the Dark Lord said knowingly, “Since my imprisonment, I have been made aware how bad Britain’s reputation is on the world stage, and many of the people who funded us in the last war are dispirited we weren’t able to overthrow the Ministry when it is obvious most of the opposition includes morons and incompetent bureaucrats. Plus the Quidditch World Cup is a moment where all violent factions are supposed to put their quarrels away. There is no official truce, but it was a de facto one before this month. Ruining that and losing all the recruits involved is a major propaganda fiasco. Foreigners are once again convinced Death Eaters are a band of dangerous psychopaths unable to handle serious opposition. The movement has become an international joke.”

“A reputation which might be a bit undeserved,” Artemis noted. “Twenty-plus recruits and one senior Death Eater could have killed a lot of people if they hadn’t forgotten their orders once they took their few casualties.”

“Yes,” Bellatrix agreed. “But they’re dead, and the ‘impartial newspapers’ care more about the results. It doesn’t matter that their exterminator would have likely been able to beat most of the Aurors and the Hit-Wizards if he or she so chose. It doesn’t matter they might have gotten away with the destruction of House Malfoy if Brent and Corban Yaxley’s plan had continued with no rescuer. It is stupid...but it is useful for our purposes, and so I won’t send letters to the *Daily Prophet* and the other important newspapers of the continent that their views are erroneous and seeing the wrong version of this battle.”

Hard eyes stared at each other before narrowing in thought.

“Any idea who did the extermination of the Death Eaters, since you quite evidently didn’t?” Artemis asked lightly before adding. “Not that it stopped Crouch to believe the contrary, obviously.”

“Yes, I heard. Poor Crouch. I never used elemental war spells, thank you very much. They are powerful and tend to possess interesting side-effects to control the flow of battle on a battlefield, but they make you ran out of energy faster than you can say ‘Quidditch’. Moreover, I do not spend my time in dusty libraries researching obscure and specialised war spells of Norse and Roman history. I leave that to the Ravenclaws.”

“Well, someone evidently thought it was a good idea to learn these spells and used the Death Eaters as their testing ground.”

“And in a manner that left no place to chance,” the Dark Witch approved. “Yaxley foolishly revealed himself as the leader, and so was targeted first. Then the attacks came unending, merciless, and all were cast to kill. I would have had issues staying alive alone and unsupported. I know several shields which can deflect a Blizzard’s Lament, but they take a lot of energy...and they are difficult to cast.”

“So you couldn’t have done it?”

“Oh I could,” Bellatrix was prompt to deny, “but it is not how I fight. It’s not how I was trained, nor was it any lesson received from Slytherin duellists while I was at Hogwarts. It’s not enough to have the spells or a vague battle-plan. You have to genuinely believe it is your method and apply it under pressure.”

The black-haired witch looked at one the gothic sculptures in a tone which was not as confident as her usual behaviour.

“That’s why I am slightly concerned what this ‘mysterious saviour’ will want when it will be time to repay the favour we owe her.”

**30 August 1994, Paris, France**

The more Alexandra lived in presence of Lady Stella Zabini, the less she was surprised when her magical guardian pushed in front of her the equivalent of a small wardrobe of dresses no Princess worthy of the name would have refused on the spot.

“At the rhythm it is going, I will need to wear one per day if I am to have any hope to not leave them untouched, you know.”

Yes, the young witch was exaggerating. But not that much.

“There are a lot of prestigious events waiting for you this year.” The Black Widow told with a satisfied smile, no doubt thinking about all the doors opening due to Alexandra being a Champion.

“Err...yes. I mean, I didn’t think it was that many balls and prestigious events. There’s the Opening Ceremony on Halloween and the Ceremony of Wands and Weapons on November 3rd to start. I know the Yule and Summer Balls are the big prestigious events to participate, of course. The Tournament’s End Ceremony will be mostly an informal thing, and I thought that for the Venetian Carnival, you were going to insist we did shopping during the week-ends after the Tournament’s first task.”

“You thought correctly,” the Slytherin-Sorted Lady validated her hypotheses. “You didn’t count the post-trial evening ceremonies, however.”

“The post-trial what?” Her feint did not trick her guardian; Stella Zabini knew perfectly that at close-range, her hearing was perfect.

“Surely you didn’t think that each day wasn’t limited to the exploits of the sixteen Champions themselves?” It was really easy to remember that Stella was a Lamia right now. “It goes without saying that you need to survive in a rather healthy condition the trial first, evidently. Politicians, bankers, and important wizard and witches are very interested in being photographed with the heroes and heroines of the day. They general disdain those who have failed or been crippled in the fires of battle.”

“How surprising,” Alexandra blinked. “Still, I thought the post-trial stuff ended after the reward ceremony detailing who had won what.” The winner of one of the seven days of competition earned one thousand Galleons for himself or herself, and the four Champions of the school having obtained the best score during said trial also divided between themselves this sum. Assuming they were all alive at the end of the day, people tended to forget this minor point of contention.

“Alexandra, I don’t want to disappoint you, but if you’re involved in this ceremony, it is likely going to take several hours from the moment the gifts are advanced to the signing of autographs. This is the biggest international event alongside the Quidditch World Cup, and while Quidditch has a lot of wizards supporting it, interschool challenges of magic have always drawn impressive crowds. The Scuola Regina’s new stadium is, according to the documentation provided, going to welcome sixty thousand spectators coming from every country of Europe and three thousand students of Durmstrang, Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and the Scuola Regina.”

Yes, no pressure at all...and whatever she did in front of this crowd, it would be the talk of everyone from Hogwarts to Russia within the day.

“No pressure,” she murmured again. And at the end, there were whatever traps the Exchequer had ready for them.

“You are a witch who attracts a lot of attention, Alexandra,” her guardian told her while levitating towards her a brand-new emerald dress. “Thankfully for you, the spells you threw at the Quidditch World Cup were recognised as powerful, but the incompetence of the History Professors at Hogwarts meant they missed half of the point you were trying to make.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” The bane of the Death Eaters joked. It wasn’t like her guardian was going to be offended; the spell where she had caught the reference to the ice-themed and fire-fuelled spells had been found in the Zabini’s library. “But I will admit British ignorance when it comes to their nation’s history is rather...astonishing.”

It had been pre-Statute of Secrecy, but still. And it was an unpleasant era to remember, since it was the last time a Dark Lord had managed to seize power in Britain, both among the magical and non-magical population.

“These spells, or variations of them, were the favourites of Dark Lord Victorious, also known as Oliver Cromwell. Do you intend to give Dumbledore a heart attack by using them during the first task?”

Alexandra’s self-control was good, but not good enough to avoid giggling at that.

“I admit, it is extremely tempting...”

**31 August 1994, Rome, Italy**

The King of the Exchequer didn’t issue regularly grand invitations to the true members of his organisation. On that path lay failure, as the Light Powers often informed their followers of the location and the time of such events, no matter how monumental the violation of the rules or how little they knew about the nature of the defences he prepared to ‘welcome’ them.

Truly, even irregular invitations were rare to meet with him. Save his Knights, few were his subordinates who had the opportunity to meet with him once per year, and these conversations rarely lasted more than a few minutes.

Not that many complained. His was a role of leadership and punishments. He was the commander and the ruler of the Dark, not their friend or their caretaker.

Osiris had sworn to protect them from this never-damned-enough Light, not from their own experimental spells or failed attempts at immortality.

“**Welcome**.” The ancient Avatar of Darkness said in a language so ancient only a handful of people had learned of its existence, never mind the intricacies of it.

Osiris sat upon his throne, and contemplated his ‘audience’.

Directly on his right was his Queen, of course.

Then there were the ranks of Dark Wizards, Dark Witches, and every being rallied to his banner.

There were the twelve Knights, whose mere existence only was enough to unleash devastation that was remembered centuries after every witness was dead and buried.

There were twenty-four Bishops, masters of great discoveries, pursuers of impossible feats, avid of lore and recognition, forced into the darkness and eager to take revenge for recent and ancient slights.

There were thirty-six Rooks, young and old, wise and foolish. Many of them had sacrificed too much too easily, and found themselves unable to advance their Art and become the Dark Lords they wanted to be, instead reigning over the shadows and the beasts of his underworld.

There were two hundred and eighty-eight Pawns, promising and unpromising, those whom profited the most from the shields and the ancestral agreement he offered to those pursued by Ra and his lackeys.

This wasn’t of course the full might of the Exchequer. Across this ‘illuminated’ world, tens of thousands of souls served him, willingly or not. There were money-lenders and financial supporters, convinced of the rightfulness of his cause, who prayed every night that the future he had promised them would come. Many wizards and witches wanted to be part of the Pawn’s ranks, and yet lacked the raw power, the determination, or simply a vision for their candidatures to be accepted. Nonhuman beings were sometimes accepted, but alas their strict inability to wield magical foci was a massive hindrance to gaining the power they desired.

And obviously goblins were completely and utterly forbidden to apply. Thousands of precedents had proved beyond possibility of redemption that the aggressive bloodthirsty creatures couldn’t be trusted. The King of the Exchequer could tolerate greed and ambition, but not when they were an advanced forewarning of a monumental betrayal happening at the worst time possible.

“**Welcome, my wand-sworn brethren**,” Osiris began. “**A new opportunity to achieve the Great Plan is upon us**.”

He left a couple of seconds of silence before resuming his speech.

“**It is time to prepare for the Death of the Light**.”

**Author’s note**: Next, the return to Hogwarts for Alexandra and companions.