**Chapter 121**

**April of Strife**

**12 April 1995, somewhere under the city of Cairo, Egypt**

You couldn't forget how old the Exchequer as an organisation was.

Or rather, yes, you could, for a few seconds, if you made a lot of effort for some nonsensical reason.

And then its members slammed reality back at you and it was as if you crashed into a wall at high speed.

"These tunnels were dug right after the Mamluks scored their victories over the Mongols," the Queen of the Exchequer informed her as if it was no big deal. "It was one of the first steps which led to our forces regaining significant influence over the Nile and the nearby regions."

"I suppose Ra was busy elsewhere?" As arrogant and bigoted as the Archmage of Light had been, the magic involved must not have been exactly discreet. The tunnel they were currently using could let five witches pass side by side comfortably, and it had been massively enchanted several times.

"He was in the Americas at the time."

The Champion of Death blinked.

"Christopher Columbus had not yet made his fateful travel westwards."

"He did not." Morgane Rys'Ygraine Avalon seemed to find delight in her surprise. "But the Old Kingdom had had trade outposts there before the Great Enemy came. Maps survived, and of course Osiris and his accursed brother knew very well of its existence."

"Why not have engineered a 'rediscovery' centuries before it was done, then?"

"It was not so simple. By the methods we used, powerful mages could cross the Atlantic, but there were many failures which ended in death. And even for long-lived individuals, the one-way journey resulted in someone being out of reach for years."

Vampiric lips tightened for a couple of seconds before the words continued.

"Make no mistake, we never completely lost contact with what was happening on the other side of the ocean, but for centuries, the overwhelming majority of the wizards and witches who allied with us were born and trained there. It was not rare for the Knight overseeing the operations south of Panama to be introduced a single time to Osiris, at the moment of his elevation, and to never meet him again until his death."

This was certainly a cold reminder that methods of transportation, be they magical or non-magical, had improved extremely. Sure, the First Kingdom had had advanced spells and methods, but everything had disappeared into the inferno. It had taken thousands of years to rebuild everything; to consider the act of flying half-way across the world in a single day normal.

"I suppose that the non-magical population can at least take pride that they were the ones to land on the Moon first."

"Indeed," the Queen of the Exchequer nodded. "Most of our researchers did not turn their ambitions to the pursuit of leaving this world, I fear."

"The presence of the Great Enemy's craft beyond the eighth planet?"

"It certainly did not encourage the King's curiosity to focus in that direction. But no."

Alexandra raised an eyebrow as a silent question.

"Earth is our home and our birthright. We were not going to abandon it to that fanatical bigot Ra, no matter how seemingly impossible it was to defeat the Archmage with Fate enslaved to his whims."

That...that certainly made sense.

"There is also the fact that we had a large Astronomy department that had centuries of advance over non-magical devices until the modern era," the legendary witch added emotionlessly. "We have known for centuries that no planet in the Solar System is going to be propitious for colonisation attempts. Even with all the resources and the power of the Exchequer, the chances of success to turn Mars or another planet into a refuge for the human race were so close to zero few debates went past the stage of musings."

The tunnel became wider, and the amount of space above their heads increased too.

"And the Light?"

Because, yes, the Dark Lords and Ladies were forced to hide most of the time in the shadows, whether they belonged to the Exchequer or not.

The moment they took control of a kingdom or a nation, it was only a question of time before the psychopaths of the Knights of the Round Table arrived and destroyed everything.

But the Army of Light and the Trinity had had far more resources, and though the Archmage couldn't reign or rule directly, he had had all the influence and the possibilities of victory a wizard could dream of.

"The Light did nothing. It was already a force of stagnation long before your grandparents were even born."

The green eyes stared at her in an implacable manner.

"This is why every Knight save one is opposed to the idea of turning Fate into a Power of the Dark, Apprentice. Several miscreants and pathetic minds are confident they could avoid the pits that Ra fell into. We are under no such delusion. Everyone can turn complacent and arrogant if not presented with existential challenges. The Trinity and the Army of Light did, and the Exchequer is no different."

It went without saying that the next minutes of walking were done in complete silence.

**12 April 1995, the Fortified Room, deep under Cairo, Egypt**

The room was big, especially considering how many hundreds of metres of rock were between them and the surface.

It was not football stadium-big, or Minas Tirith-big, but it was easily longer than thirty metres, and its width was superior to twenty.

It should have felt bland and boring, except there were hundreds of thousands of hieroglyphs burning in red magic everywhere on the walls and the ceilings.

Alexandra could almost taste the swirls of magic these Ancient Runes which preceded most of the Pharaoh dynasties created in the air and the other elements.

It wasn't exactly reassuring. Usually, she was able to tell quickly where the threat came from when it was Runic Traps, but there were so many of them here it just wasn't feasible.

It was way, way worse than the Second Task of the Tournament to be sure.

The mages hired by the Scuola Regina weren't amateurs, but whoever had created this room was a master of the Runic Arts.

Then there was the massive urn at the centre of the room.

It was entirely black, was so tall it came up to her neck, and it burned with the same crimson hieroglyphs, all the while shaking violently at irregular intervals.

Yes, there was *something* sealed inside this urn, all right.

"Why are we here...your Majesty?"

The answer was prompt and blunt.

"We are here because you are not ready to face Arianna Dumbledore."

Alexandra scowled, no matter how much she tried to not show it.

"I have killed plenty of dangerous people, and I have gained a lot of impressive skills these last months."

"You faced several dangerous Light wizards and witches, along with their Champions. But you have no experience **in** duelling a Knight of the Dark. And the Knight Necromancer's chosen method of long-life is the phylactery."

"She is a Lich, then," the Scuola Regina's Library had some very uncomplimentary things to say about mages who cheated Death that way. "At least, that's what the books on the subject said to call beings like her. She faced a death experience, somehow survived, and created a phylactery to store her soul away from the body she uses on a daily basis."

"Precisely," Morgane Rys'Ygraine Avalon told her. "And this means that as long as you don't find the phylactery, you can slay her bodies and incinerate them a million times, it will not get you any closer to victory."

The young Ravenclaw gritted her teeth.

"I admit it's not good, but Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle created plenty of Horcruxes, and that method of immortality didn't exactly get him very far."

"The Horcrux is a lesser and flawed version of the Phylactery," the Queen immediately dismissed the argument. "A wizard who wishes to create a Horcrux can't feel regret and many, many other emotions, otherwise the Horcrux self-destructs. The act of creating more is tortuous on the psyche and the body, making you a crippled version of who you were before the ritual. Furthermore, staying far away from the Horcrux badly weakens the caster. The wizard or the witch who has created it can technically keep it far away from himself or herself at all times, but only at the price of a loss of sanity and debilitating pain. And last but not least, the receptacle of the Horcrux has to be something the user cares greatly about, or feels a massive obsession about. This is why in general good investigations on Horcrux users tend to generally create a list of possible artefacts in short order."

Seen that way, it was not surprising that Voldemort had been led like a pig to the sacrificial altar by Ra and his army of Light fanatics.

"The worst part, however, is that if the original body is destroyed, a Horcrux will keep you alive, but it will keep you as a wraith, something far less than a human. Without outside assistance, you will be unable to create a new body for yourself."

"And the Phylactery, I take it, does not share this weakness."

"No," the Queen of the Exchequer confirmed. "Assuredly a Phylactery can't be created out of anything, it needs special materials. But it can be anywhere, on a different continent than the user for several millennia, and there will be no mental or physical degradation. And once a body is destroyed, the Lich can wield magic anew, feeling a drastic and overwhelming urge to rebuild her body."

"It will take her days, at least?" Right?

"One of our members did it in seven hours, though he was a bit in a hurry."

Seven hours. Sauron was an amateur compared to this wizard or witch.

"I take it," Alexandra began slowly and grimly, "that it is too much to hope that her plan to become the Champion of Fate is entirely delusional?"

"She is not a possible Chosen." The Death-imbued eyes flashed lethally. "But there are other ways to attract the attention of a Power and disrupt the careful equilibrium of magic."

Yes, they were.

And the most famous was a sacrificial ritual on an immense scale.

"It has never been done." And yes, Alexandra was aware she was trying to reassure herself, thank you very much.

"The same was true of Ra when he began his crusade of madness and turned six Powers into Light ones, ending the world as our ancestors knew it." The Vampiri Romani of legend took a breath that she didn't need. "If Fate could be changed to become Light, it stands to reason the same Power can be turned to the Dark too."

It would kill them as surely as Excalibur killed when it was out of its scabbard.

It had taken thousands of years to get rid of Ra; the world hadn't one thousand more to remove a megalomaniac Dumbledore from her Dark Throne.

They had not three complete years in the first place.

And no, the Champion of the Morrigan did not believe a single second Arianna Dumbledore could win against Apophis.

This was an abomination of such power that the button 'I win' of a Champion of Fate was not going to be sufficient.

"But enough about that, Apprentice," Morgane Rys'Ygraine Avalon spoke, clapping her hand once, and generating a pulse of magic that resulted in the giant urn shaking with such violence that for a couple of seconds, she felt it was going to break. "As I said, you are not ready. You rely too much on raw power, and not on your mind. It is a pity, because the latter is by far your most redoubtable weapon."

"Err...okay, and this training is..." yes, not finishing her sentence was very much deliberate.

The command came, elegant and brutal.

"There is an Ifrit in this urn. Defeat it."

**12 April 1995, the Ifrit Room, deep under Cairo, Egypt**

The gates closed behind the Queen of the Exchequer in a thunderous sound that was way too dramatic to not be the idea of some theatre master trying to play mind games.

Unfortunately, Alexandra couldn't turn her head to check if there were foreign wizards there to laugh at her predicament.

The urn in front of her had opened, and a horrid smell of sulphur came out.

Instinctively, the Hydra Animagus exchanged her Ravenclaw robes for her black armour.

In her left hand, she had her new wand. In her right, she held a silvery one-handed sword – her training weapon these days.

She had no idea what-

PAIN!

"OUCH!"

It was undignified.

It was humiliating.

She had not even seen the blow coming, seriously-

"What-"

She stopped, because this time she could see the blow coming, and it was already-

Somehow, Alexandra was able to evade this one.

Only to receive an uppercut a heartbeat later.

"FULMEN-"

But the lightning magic flickered out, and a second punch knocked all the air out of her lungs.

It hurt.

It hurt way too much; what was her regeneration doing?

Damn it, being a Hydra Animagus was two-thirds of the reasons why she was so resistant to physical and nerve trauma and-

Her eyes widened. She was too slow, her lightning spell had faltered out, the opponent could sneak upon her like it was no big deal-

"**At last, she understands**."

The creature appeared, in a series of miniature fireworks.

It looked like a middle-aged man, albeit one with a phenomenally-high turban.

Except, of course, middle-aged men didn't tend to have red skin, nor did they have claws instead of hands.

He wore a single, ugly loincloth as clothes, and did not appear to wield a single weapon.

Which clearly meant nothing, given how easily this monster had struck blow after blow.

The Lady Protector spat blood and stood on shaky legs.

"This room negates or at the very least decreases all magical abilities which aren't yours, Ifrit."

A mocking chuckle echoed across the walls.

"**You are far quicker to understand than your predecessor**."

Alexandra wasn't pleased at all by the words.

"My predecessor?"

"**They invited him here**," the Ifrit cheerfully and maliciously informed her. "**A very impolite individual. A Champion of Angra Mainyu. I wondered for many minutes if he was not a Champion of War trying to trick me into believing he was a Champion of Death**."

Fingers clicked, and a tongue of flame was hurled at her.

But this time she was ready, and a Runic barrier was thrown in the way just in time.

**"By now, you must have an idea what the purpose of this meeting is."**

The power of the being was unleashed, and Alexandra felt **Fire** and **Air** raging uncontrolled. This was clearly not a Summon, but it was not a being of bones and blood like Centaurs or Leprechauns either.

Wizards and witches must have clearly done something long ago to create the Ifrits, because one elemental creature could exist in a highly-magical environment, but two elements was utterly absurd.

"I am here to learn how to defeat highly dangerous opponents such as you in conditions that are near-insurmountable."

"**No, foolish little snake of Death**." The Ifrit bared his fangs, which were yellow and disgusting; the smell of carrion that assaulted her senses was not exactly improving matters either. "**The purpose is to beat the arrogance out of you. It seems you are rather young and powerful; on average, they send me Champions that are** far **older. The last one was close to his thirties. But don't worry, you are old enough I will not punish you with a spanking**."

Alexandra didn't lash out. Instead, she was already changing her approach. If the Ifrit powers weren't diminished like hers were, this naturally meant the fire- and air-based spells would suffer little degradation when her favourite attacks like Fulmen Imperator would be useless.

"You might believe that." Alexandra hissed. "I happen to disagree."

The Ifrit levitated one metre above ground, then shifted into a provocative gesture and his claws made a 'come at me' insulting move.

"**You have a stubborn head, it's going to be a pleasure hammering it. I love my job**!"

The Ifrit cackled, and Alexandra attacked.

**12 April 1995, Alexandra's Villa, Lands of the Magical Republic of Venice**

Morag giggled when Alexandra collapsed on the couch.

Her friend looked half-dead on her feet.

It wasn't a small exploit given that during the Sixth Task, the Champion of House Ravenclaw hadn't looked so exhausted before Eleonora da Riva and Ambre de Courtois defeated her.

"Yes, yes, laugh all you want," the black-haired witch mumbled before ordering a House Elf to bring her the biggest plate of fish food that could be found on short notice.

Well she had been given permission, no? Morag giggled harder and louder.

"What was it this time? You returned to the wrestling of crocodiles in the Nile?"

"For your personal information," Alexandra grimaced, "it was an Ifrit, and I would describe it as more of a boxing match."

The MacDougal Heiress frowned.

"I wasn't under the impression those magical creatures were any kind of threat to someone as powerful as you."

"They are when you fight them in a room where your main elemental affinities are neutralised or severely powered down, and the flame and air attacks of the Ifrit are multiplied by a factor of ten."

Morag gave her friend an impression of sympathy.

"That must not have been pleasant."

"As far as training duels go, it was horrible," Alexandra immediately agreed. "I think I prefer being beaten over and over by Professor Flitwick. At least that way, I was sure my spells worked! Here I had to constantly think of what the hieroglyphs couldn't absorb."

There was a mix of hissing and huffing. Many insults were uttered, some questioning the parentage and the preferences of the Ifrit race as a whole.

"But you won. Didn't you?"

"I won. After six hours of enduring every punishment and trick of the Ifrit."

"Six hours? Are you sure you were supposed to...err...train that long?"

"I wasn't going to admit defeat to that sorry excuse of a flame genie!"

Morag urged herself to not facepalm.

Stubbornness, thy name was Alexandra Potter.

"By the way, why a boxing match? I wasn't under the impression you practise that violent sport..."

"I saw Dudley and the other miscreants organise a few matches last week in London. I decided to copy a few moves against the Ifrit. Long-range spells were all missing or negated, so I surrounded myself in a cloak of flames, and I went to close-quarters."

"For six hours," the red-haired Ravenclaw deadpanned.

"For the time it took me to find an effective strategy," her friend corrected. "Thank the Morrigan, my regeneration really returned to full power the moment I left the room."

Morag shook her head slowly at first, then more forcefully.

"And what kind of 'strategy' is effective against an Ifrit? Punching him until he proposes you three wishes?"

"No," Alexandra stuck her tongue out. Very longue, the tongue, she must have transfigured it from her Hydra's form while Morag wasn't looking at her. "I just used the environment against the Ifrit."

The redheaded girl shook her head.

"Fine. Keep your secrets, I will find out in time."

**14 April 1995, Westminster Palace, London**

It might be the Slytherin part of herself being cynical, but Alexandra had never doubted the 'honeymoon' between the magical world and non-magical world would end after a few months.

There were too many points of contention, and the cultures were way too different.

The Gryffindor part of her – a side she often tried to pretend did not exist in front of some Hogwarts students – wished it could have lasted a bit longer, though.

"Your Ward Masters and Enchanters are refusing to cooperate!"

Alexandra hadn't bothered learning the name of the man who was speaking. He was an important official working under a Minister. He looked pompous and loved to listen to himself speaking.

He also was a moron.

"First of all, the very idea any wizard or witch are 'mine' is utterly ridiculous." Some things had to be said before stupidity reigned supreme. "I am Lady Protector of the Isles, not a Goddess or whatever. Yes, I exert a significant amount of political power over the Ministry of Magic and the Wizengamot, but I am not in control of their lives. I do not dictate how my friends and my allies live their lives from dawn to dusk, and I don't 'own' them."

Over half of the committee's members who were facing her at the other end of the room murmured words of approval.

The others, however...at least a third of them were really harbouring belligerent expressions.

No wonder Amelia Bones had so enjoyed 'delegating' the honour of participating in this committee session.

"Second point, Enchanters, Rune Masters, Curse-Breakers, Ward Masters, and plenty of other professions have the liberty of choosing their clients, courtesy of centuries of tradition and monopoly in their fields. Their services are requested by everyone who has the money to pay for them. And their Guilds are ancient institutions. Telling them they have to cooperate with you was never going to go well. It might get worse if you insist on being impolite and lacking any sense of courteous manners."

"The Guilds can be broken and replacements found!" another politician barked, this one with hirsute blonde hair. "There are plenty of young wizards born from the non-magical world who will jump at the opportunity to replace these elitists and inefficient systems!"

"I don't think you would like the results," Alexandra warned him. "Assuming I lost my senses and decided to agree to follow something that short-sighted, yes, I don't doubt you will find some young and other not-so-young wizards and witches to create organisations that will not offend your cultural preferences. But you best not expect quality work. The Guilds have cornered their parts of the market, and it takes years for one of their apprentices to earn one single Mastery of an important magical field. Dissolving the Guilds will open the market, but waiting for other wand-wielders to gain sufficient knowledge until they're the equals of the current Guildmasters will certainly take decades."

"Foreign wizards will be incredibly happy to take the seats and the market shares of their rivals!"

"Plenty of foreign countries use the same system as the British Isles," Alexandra replied unimpressed. "Their Guildmasters won't help you dismantle the system of the Isles, not knowing that they will be next if you succeed."

"The French don't!"

Come on, nobody could be that stupid...oh, wait, this one was serious. Never mind.

"I don't know if you've checked some historical books of the Magical World, but our relationships with the French Ministry of Magic have been a bit tense *lately*. And yes, by this word, I mean the last seven or eight centuries."

There were a few chuckles and a few polite coughs.

Alexandra bared her teeth.

"Yes, the French system to teach students how to acquire incredible advanced magical skills is far more innovative than the British one. They reformed it a lot after World War II and their post-Grindelwald reconstruction. But I can assure you, gentlemen, that if I walk in front of the Wizengamot and tell them we must adopt it, I am almost certain to face a revolt immediately, and the august members of the Ministry will force me to choose between the reforms and staying as Lady Protector."

There were only so many stones they could remove from the 'house' of the Ministry before something abruptly collapsed or began to burn. Many Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot had brothers, sisters, uncles, cousins, aunts, and more that were part of several Guilds, and that assumed they hadn't gained their Mastery and become full-time members themselves.

"Last point, there is already a massive shortage of specialists like the ones that have been mentioned, courtesy of several not-very-wise measures and laws implemented by Albus Dumbledore."

"You should stop blaming your predecessor for every ill that befell the Ministry of Magic, Lady Protector," a third politician had the arrogance to interrupt her and lecture her like she was six or seven.

"Who I am supposed to blame, then?" the Hydra Animagus hissed. "Who was Chief Warlock since 1945? Who was famous enough to be the advisors of over a dozen of Ministers in the last decades? Someone who was also Headmaster of the largest and most prestigious school of the Isles during all that amount of time, and ensured many of his supporters were found in the upper spheres of the political life. There is someone to blame, and I don't think it will be me or my friends, since we didn't happen to be born decades after some of the most spectacular measures were passed."

This, at least, convinced the moron to shut up.

"We have a shortage of experienced specialists, and the coffers are empty. We hope we will be able to find some funds, courtesy of some recovery efforts and investigation conducted on ex-Minister Fudge, but there are many problems which will have to be dealt with in the next several years. And convincing some members of our society that the grass is greener elsewhere will make things worse. We already lost thousands of our best and brightest wizards with the previous civil war; I, as Lady protector, am not going to tolerate the same stupidity repeating itself over and over because we failed to learn from past experiences."

In an ideal word, this would have been applauded and cheered upon.

It was the real world, however, and thus some politicians were vociferating in the seconds after.

Alexandra sighed internally. It was way better when she could kill someone without repercussion...

**14 April 1995, 10 Downing Street, London**

Sometimes, the Prime Minister wondered if the members of his own political party had death wishes, or they just thought that now that magic had been proven to exist, miracles were just going to happen if they asked for them.

It was that, or they had a sudden desire to be eaten by a fourteen-year-old girl transforming into a Hydra.

The Prime Minister honestly didn't know which option was worse, to be honest.

"In the name of my party and every member of the Houses of Commons and the Lords, I want to apologise for the...distasteful episode of this committee."

"You weren't the one who added impoliteness to unfeasible ideas, Mister Prime Minister. *You* don't have to apologise."

The green eyes didn't blink; they stayed there, watching him calmly.

Before watching the Sixth Task of the Magical Tournament, it would have been half-reassuring.

Now it was anything but; his instincts told him he was in a room with a patient predator, one hiding in the form of a young teenage girl.

And his mind conjured plenty of unpleasant scenarios in his head about the possibility of the Hydra suddenly not playing around and unleashing its true power.

The words 'Hail Hydra' had already not been funny at all, in his opinion, no matter how much children seemed to be delighted that a witch had read comics and other superhero works.

These days, it was more something that felt like it warranted some serious anxiety and your limbs shaking in fear. Yes, they had missiles launched by fighter jets; the army had tanks and their warships could destroy targets beyond the horizon, but all of that required advanced technology and millions of hours of industrial work. Alexandra Potter wielded power on par with that at the tip of her hands, and she didn't rely on anyone to unleash it.

"I will reiterate my apologies nonetheless."

The young Lady Protector huffed, but after a couple of seconds, nodded.

"I suppose I will have to accept it, then. But please let's avoid a repetition of it for the next month or so. I have a lot of things to do, between my academic studies, the Tournament, and other vital and time-consuming duties. The days have already too few hours to do everything, I refuse to waste most of them in squabbles that poison the political wells and contribute to absolutely nothing."

"Duly noted," the Prime Minister answered, a bit relieved by the exhausted tone the message had been delivered in. "I think several of them will re-think their deeds by tomorrow. They were under a lot of pressure."

"They were arrogant and did refuse to consider that the wizards and the witches of the Isles of Britain have a completely different culture, and they won't at all like changes imposed by outsiders." It almost convinced him to wince at the bluntness of the tone. "And honestly, I did warn them. Magical beings are a small society. We have a massive shortage of manpower for some of the things I hear about in the newspapers. If we had millions of Enchanters or Ward Masters like some people fantasize, it would have been the Magical World as the dominant force on the planet, and the non-magical men and women hiding their presence through various technological devices. Ra did not push for the Statute of Secrecy because the magical side had the armies and the influence; he did it because the non-magical humans outnumbered his faction a million-to-one, and since they didn't wield magic, he couldn't control them like he converted the mages of the Light."

Then the green eyes grew more thoughtful as his words were considered.

"Pressure from which direction, by the way? You are the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom."

"So I am," a faint smile appeared on his smile. "But we have cousins on the other side of the Atlantic who are very worried about their security."

"I understand the existence of witches and wizards came out like a bolt from a blue sky, but if the United States or any country thinks warding a city is easy, they are going to be on the receiving end of massive disappointments. High-quality magical works demand time, a lot of resources, and powerful wizards and witches. No one built an invincible citadel with a snap of their fingers, or at least, I never heard about it."

"I wasn't going to argue against that. But the United States have real security concerns. They are the ones to organise the Olympics next year, for one."

"Ah," the young girl passed a hand in her black hair, before grimacing. "I was so busy participating in the Tournament I really forgot about them, to be honest. Yes, I see how it could be a problem."

"Problems," the Prime Minister insisted. "The magical communities gathered under the banners of the UMAS are already militating that magical sports must be introduced, or they will cast some sort of curse for everyone to be unable to locate the athletics stadium where the opening ceremony will take place."

"They really said that?" The Prime Minister acquiesced, solemnly. "I wish I could say I am surprised, but..."

The opening of the hands was a sign of exasperation and frustration, no doubt about it.

"Naturally, there are already citizens on both sides of the Atlantic screaming that magic users have an unfair advantage over non-magical men and women."

"Many don't, as long as they don't have a wand or a magical focus," the Lady Protector pointed out with a smirk. "In fact, when I think about it, most of our population is rather out of shape. The number of people in the magical schools of Britain and Ireland remains frustratingly low. If magical sports aren't added to the Olympics, it is entirely possible wizards and witches would be unable to win a single medal."

"You expect me to believe you wouldn't win a single medal if you entered, Lady Protector?" There were certain photos circulating in the tabloids of how Alexandra Potter could lift easily hundreds of tons of metal with one hand tied behind her back. The Prime Minister didn't fancy himself a sports expert, but he really believed it was enough to win all the competitions of weightlifting. All the other athletes would fight for the silver from the start.

"Well, no, but I am a special case."

The Prime Minister allowed himself an unimpressed glance.

"Yes, in hindsight, all Animagi are special cases," the young witch acknowledged. "But I stand by my words: I remain a special case. The things I can do at fourteen aren't done by the majority of the mages, adults or not."

It wasn't difficult to guess it was something the Lady Protector took a bit of pride in too.

"For the sake of curiosity, is the English team good at this 'Quidditch' sport I've learnt so many of our 'magical cousins' always swear about every day?"

"No, it's rather horrible, actually. The players got humiliated by Transylvania at the last World Cup, and I think the previous coach is still trying to hide as a hermit on the Mongolian steppes in shame."

Truly, it was a day where being the Prime Minister wasn't about receiving good news, but dealing with all the bad news...

**15 April 1995, Ca'Sforza, Venice, the City of the Seals of Fire and Water**

Lucrezia was very pleased when she saw Alexandra had come dressed in one of the green-black gowns that had been gifted to her before the Fourth Task.

The young Lady Protector was simply sublime, in this artwork of fabric that united emerald and obsidian colours.

And her Changelina had improved the style, adding brooch, earrings, and necklace. The serpentine mask of darkness hiding her traits was just the perfect final touch.

"You look radiant, Lady Potter."

"Thank you, Lady Sforza."

And the Champion of Death removed her mask, breaking the non-magical illusion.

"Any problems?"

"If there had been, I wouldn't have invited you so quickly, no?"

The younger Champion huffed before nodding.

"I was a bit concerned you may not want to involve yourself in this mess."

The Champion of Tlaloc purred.

"Alexandra, whatever lies that Knight Necromancer was willing to shout for everyone to hear in public, her ambitions are incredibly evident. She wants to become the Champion of Fate, to bend magic to her will. We both know what happened the last time someone had these ambitions; the only difference is that this time, it would be the Dark instead of the Light."

It was like the Dumbledore line was fundamentally unable to learn something from the mistakes of the past. If the stakes hadn't been so high, Lucrezia would have been almost eager to see this traitorous Necromancer be trampled by Apophis three years from now.

"Yes." The beautiful green eyes looked away, contemplating the ancestral paintings of Ca'Sforza. "I suppose you shared several of your theories with your mother."

"Of course," Lucrezia admitted shamelessly. "Not that I was of a big help, I freely admit. Arianna Dumbledore can hide pretty much anywhere, unfortunately."

Once you reached the magical proficiency of a Knight, it was extremely easy to hide from wizards with tracking abilities. And in the case it wasn't, a Lady-level witch could erect defences that would make sure all magic dispersed from spells and rituals would never be noticed.

And it was a vast and diverse planet they were living upon.

For all the resources of any organisation, you never were short of hiding places, from Siberia to the deserts of South America.

"Thus we don't know where she will strike in June."

"We don't," the Venetian Champion agreed, "but it is evident that your little scheme is going to generate a reaction."

The eyes of the Champion of the Morrigan refocused on her the next second.

"I would have thought Arianna Dumbledore would love having the idea of more Champions to submit to her will."

"Champions that she chose herself, yes," Lucrezia smirked. "She didn't choose Malatesti, however. And with his growing attraction for a certain Champion of Fire..."

"Is that what it is called in Venice these days?"

Lucrezia giggled. It was quite often she thought it was a pity Alexandra Potter did not use more of her humour every day.

"Placing them together in the Doge Court was something few saw coming, and I wasn't among them," she admitted truthfully. "But now, it is truly fascinating to see them try to control their emotions when they're close to each other."

The Champion of Death snorted.

"In any case," Lucrezia took the hand of her fellow Champion and began to escort her towards the ballroom, "we need Malatesti as a Champion of Magic. We are already going to have several novices; it's inevitable given how many Champions of the Light and the Dark lost their lives. And yes, Romeo lost his mantle of Champion, but he's the best alternative we have. Unless you have plans for De Condé and Longbottom?"

The grimace was not very expressive, but it was there, and Alexandra Potter did not exactly try hard to hide it.

"I have not made any mystery that I don't trust them," the green-eyed girl commented bluntly, emerald sparks of magic dancing around her fingers. "Eleonora proved she could be trusted; those two were cornered when Ra prepared their Grail-induced brainwashing, and they did end up submitting to him in the end."

Lucrezia thought it was a bit more complicated than that, but then she was not the one De Condé and Longbottom had made assassination attempts upon.

"This is duly noted. But this confirms my point: if not them, then we need Malatesti, and since he will likely ensure Delacour will fight with us..."

"We must guarantee he becomes the new Champion of Strife."

"Yes. Though I have to deliver a warning from my mother and...other parties. There's going to be a lot of War inside it, whatever we do. It may look like a lot with the Power of Water, but it is a superficial impression, since War-Strife has never been attuned to the Plane of Metal."

"I realise this is unprecedented-"

"Oh, I agree this is still the best option out of all scenarios," she interrupted the younger Champion. "Don't forget that if we don't do that, the plausible end is that War becomes the Power of Blood once more. In the old times, this could be dealt with, the priests had traditions and safeguards to make sure it didn't get out of hand. Today? We don't have the guidelines or the power to make sure it doesn't become a series of three-way massive conflicts ravaging the planet."

Lucrezia decided not to mention that Alexandra Potter as the Champion of Metal also was something her mother and plenty of other Knights wanted to avoid. There were proverbs about swords cutting too sharp for anyone's good, and they definitely applied here.

"And the basic rituals?"

"They're not that difficult, though we will have to make sure the timing is precise. Once it begins, we will have to rush to the Seal of War-Strife, wherever it is located. The secret is out, and plenty of beings have an interest in becoming one of the thirteen Champions."

"I see. The sooner, the better, I suppose?"

"Evidently." Lucrezia purred. "And I want a payment for my services."

"What sort of...oh." The Champion of Death's blush was adorable, and yes, she saw clearly what was asked for. "I have a girlfriend..."

"Oh, don't worry, I intend to secure her support and her participation beforehand." The redhead Necromancer-in-being was adorable too, you didn't refuse 'gifts' like that.

"You're incorrigible, Champion of Desire and Water," the Hydra hissed. "Thank the Powers for small favours, you don't intend to celebrate the Carnival for more than fifteen days next year."

"There are times for enchanted days, and they must be cherished and celebrated," the Succubus smiled. "But as beautiful as fifteen days of pleasure and parties living a life of excitement and joy are, we can't avoid the solving of problems for too long."

And as the Queen of Exchequer had told her in person, no one had the budget to organise a year-long Carnival of Venice. Although if Apophis did indeed get vanquished, there would be a monumental party worthy of the exploit it represented!

"I presume you want to speak more of it tomorrow?"

"Definitely," Alexandra Potter spoke. "First I suppose, we have to listen to what the Judges have plotted while we had our backs turned. I honestly fear the worst for the Seventh Task."

"It's true that after their sadistic plan of mushrooms and the shocking coalition led by Eleonora, we can really fear the worst; their sadistic minds are truly something to be wary of."

**18 April 1995, the river near the Scuola Regina Coliseum, lands of the Scuola Regina**

Surprisingly, the location where the Judges and the journalists waited for them was outside of the Coliseum.

Alexandra had not expected that.

Judging by the expressions of her fellow Champions, this was something they all shared.

On the one hand, it was an unpleasant reminder that there were plenty of things in this Tournament that no Ravenclaw saw coming until it was too late.

And yes, this applied both to her and all her 'substitutes'.

On the other hand, while they were not inside the Coliseum, they weren't exactly far from it.

The meeting's location was on the northern bank of the river, just outside of the morning shadow of the Coliseum of the Scuola Regina.

It was a rather windy and cloudy day, and the air was rather cold, since the sun had yet to provide more than a few timid rays to warm up the earth.

The proximity of the river, of course, didn't help. It had rained a lot in the last two days, and the currents were rather violent. It went without saying that no one chose to swim in it; assuming you had the strength to not be drowned by the watery element, there was no pleasure to be taken from it given how cold it was.

Even Krum wasn't swimming in the river so early in the spring, according to Hermione. If that didn't say something about how unsuitable the river was for aquatic hobbies, nothing would.

"Any idea why they're making us wait here?" Cedric asked next to her.

"None," Alexandra answered before snorting. "Actually, I suppose part of the reason they requested we come here instead of the Coliseum is that they don't want us to have a look of what is prepared inside, but outside of that, your guess is as good as mine."

"Cho is convinced this is going to be a labyrinth. She read the same archives as you did, and a lot of times in the past, the Tri-Wizard Tournament ended with a labyrinth."

Alexandra had indeed read the archives, but she wasn't as convinced as the older Ravenclaw.

"Practically, I suppose a labyrinth *could* work as the Seventh Task."

"But you aren't convinced."

"The problem with a labyrinth is that yes, it can provide some spectacle, but if the person in the lead can navigate the maze without the other participants being able to catch up, the suspense is going to be extremely limited."

"I see what you mean."

"This isn't going to be a labyrinth! How can anyone think about this stupidity? They are going to ask us to take a treasure from a dragon!"

Alexandra closed her eyes and counted to ten in the privacy of her mind. There were days where she really, really regretted that the lethal nature of the Tournament was a thing of the past.

"Please tell me there's a chance Montague is coming back."

"Suddenly fond of him, Potter?"

"I am suddenly remembering Graham Montague had some good analysis and his presence wasn't too unbearable, yes, Diggory," the Hydra Animagus declared sarcastically. "Unlike his replacement, of course!"

"I am still here, you know," Theodore Nott sneered.

Alexandra glared at him.

The new Slytherin Champion took the hint to go elsewhere in what was certainly a restrained version of panic.

"That Seventh Task promises to be fun, doesn't it?" Obviously, the Hufflepuff Champion had missed nothing of the exchange. "I wish it could have been Blaise Zabini instead of Nott."

Alexandra shrugged.

"I feel the same, but there's no point arguing about something we can't change. Nott will be the final Slytherin Champion." The Lady Protector made a small pause before chuckling. "In a way, it's rather remarkable we only reached Nott for the final Task. Just after Warrington's death, I was trying to bet a few Sickles with Fred and George that we would be at the final substitute by now."

"They must not have offered you great odds by then."

"There wasn't a bet in the first place," Alexandra replied with a grin. "They told me at the time they didn't take suckers' bets."

"Sometimes reality is truly stranger than fiction," the Badger wisely proclaimed before his smile went missing. "What are you going to do about Nott?"

"Honestly, Diggory? Nothing. I have no fondness for him; I think everyone understood that in the last minutes. But I am not going to waste my time dealing with him. Whether he fails or succeeds for his only Task is up to him. I am going to try to win this Tournament, and I have no time to lose with some kind of useless Junior Death Eater."

"Harsh but true," Angelina Johnson intervened, her long mane blazing in the wind. "Did you hear that-"

There was a series of colossal splashes, and suddenly the current of the rivers abruptly changed.

There were fantastic amounts of bubbles following that.

"I wasn't aware-" Krum began in his heavily-accented Italian.

He didn't get time to finish, as a ship emerged from the river.

"This doesn't look like the ship of Durmstrang," Cedric reacted.

"That's because it isn't." Alexandra told him. "The flagship of the Institute is large enough to house all the students of the delegation, while this one is far smaller. Besides, Durmstrang chooses either Viking stuff for tradition or galleons for transport capacity. This one is neither. It's a caravel."

While refurbishing the Dreadnoughts, Alexandra had read a lot of stuff about the different types of sailing ships which had dominated the seas and the oceans before steam engines were a thing.

Moreover, caravels were kind of famous – or infamous, if you were among the civilisations which had ended up destroyed by the Spanish conquistadors.

Alexandra suddenly had a bad idea, one which made her giggle.

She raised her hand.

"No, Champion Potter, you won't have the authorisation to bring your Dreadnought to the Seventh Task."

Alexandra lowered her hand, all the while presenting an expression of utter virtuousness.

"I'm disappointed you think so little of me, Honourable Judges."

Viktor Krum immediately raised his hand a second after that.

"No, Champion Krum, this ship doesn't fly."

The Bulgarian Seeker lowered his hand with deep regret on his face, making sure several Champions laughed...with some distinct relief in their voices.

"Now that the first questions have been answered, it is time to make your hearts beat faster and reveal to you the intricacies of the Seventh Task! It is going to be a regatta, an obstacle course, and a treasure hunt!"

The Moroccan Judge grinned.

"All at the same time."

The gasps and expressions of incredulity were loud and lasted a long time.

Alexandra just sighed.

Well, at least, they weren't going to finish this Tournament bored...

**20 April 1995, the Dead Fields of Camlann, Pandemonium**

The Fields of Camlann hadn't changed at all since her last visit.

They were just as dreary and dead as the last time.

It was a grey, barren land, and the multitudes of corpses were there to emphasize the folly of this carnage.

Camlann.

Every Lord and battalion commander who had mustered troops and magical creatures to go to this battlefield had lost, and in all likelihood, never returned.

It had not been enough to end the Wars of the Light and the Dark.

Ra had not taken the field, and thus Fate had been kept enslaved for another five hundred years.

It was difficult to not feel melancholy looking at the soldiers of Mordred and Arthur.

But besides that, several times, the Ravenclaw couldn't help but feel some satisfaction.

Plenty of Centaurs, Veelas, and other forces had fought on the side of the Knights of the Round Table, eager to spill blood in the name of crusaders who proclaimed their hatred of magic.

Camlann had seen all of them perish; a demographic disaster some of them had yet to recover from to this day.

And no, Alexandra didn't think the Grail had been used to brainwash them all. Most of the time, the use of this abominable artefact had been 'reserved' for the Champions of the Light and the 'paragons' of the King of Camelot.

"**This is what will happen if Arianna Dumbledore succeeds**." The crows hadn't announced the coming of the Morrigan this time. A second ago the Power of Death hadn't been there; now it was.

"I didn't think her goal included turning this world into a poor copy of Pandemonium."

The traitor of the Exchequer had ambitions to become a Champion of Fate, yes, and to plunge the world into the Dark for millennia. But this did not mean she wanted to turn the different continents into vast necropolises.

"**Her goals do not matter. Arianna Dumbledore is a being of undeath. Be it Vampires, Lich, Inferi, Ghosts, or any other undead being, we Powers formally swore to never choose a Champion from their ranks. Their very nature contributes nothing to the Cycle of Life and Death. Their actions can only remove life, not create it. While their presence is sometimes tolerated, it can't be praised**."

Alexandra grimaced.

Evidently, seen like that...it would be bad for any Power to acknowledge a Lich as their Champion.

But since Arianna Dumbledore had decided to go for Fate, it likely would be ten times worse.

The 'Undeath' part would likely begin to taint Fate the moment her plans came to fruition, and in turn it would begin to exert pressure on the other Powers.

There would be fewer and fewer births, not only of wizards and witches, but also of humans and animals.

It likely would take centuries, but at the end, the only souls to walk this earth would be the undead, since no one would ever have the capacity to replace them.

The green eyes of the daughter of Lilian Potter closed for several seconds.

"One can only wonder if the fate the Great Enemy has in store for us is preferable to this slow agony."

"**I assure you, my Champion, that while the slow extinction and realm of undead of Arianna Dumbledore are unpleasant prospects, the Great Enemy will do far, far worse to you and every living being of this planet if you give it the opportunity**."

The Hydra Animagus wanted to believe it was an exaggeration.

Alas, having met a part of Apophis now, she knew it really wasn't.

If the Morrigan told her the Devourer from the Stars was really going to do worse if victorious...well, she wasn't going to ask for the details. Alexandra didn't want to have a few hundred sleepless nights, thank you very much.

"Then I suppose I will have to stop them before they can destroy everything, no?" She had really hoped Apophis would be the only problem for the next three years, but it seemed every nutcase of importance was now coming out to fulfil stupid dreams of domination.

The nightmare, alas, wasn't over.

"**The future is not yet written**."

That was nice to hear. Let the Prophets, Seers, and Oracles stay away in their lairs.

No one knew if it was going to end in a victory or a defeat, but the fate of this war was in their hands, not in those of artefacts Ra had forged to brainwash and kill all those who didn't want to bow to his tyrannical will.

"I am going to open the door to Strife."

"**Arianna Dumbledore has sent several fools to the Seal**."

In other words, her traps were already in place and ready to be triggered.

"I thank you for the warning, Lady Morrigan. Permission to explain to them the error of their ways?"

**21 April 1995, somewhere in the Andean Mountain Range, Bolivia, South America**

The weather reminded her of London.

Yes, it was sarcastic: in plain English, it meant it was raining.

"Of course British girls are used to this dreadful humidity," Fleur Delacour commented under a red umbrella, her body repelling all the attempts of the skies to get her wet with an aura of **Fire**.

Alexandra decided to answer with a snort.

"If you think this is English weather, you haven't seen anything."

"I don't believe you."

The Champion of Death shook her head.

"We have bad weather and awful food, oh Champion of Fire. Or is it awful weather and bad food? I tend to forget."

"Think of it as an excellent preparation for the next Task," Lucrezia suggested, inspecting her nails. "We are all going to get a bit wet with this improvised regatta."

"Thank you, I was just trying to forget about it." Alexandra paused. "We still don't know much about the Task itself. There will be one caravel per Champion, and we will certainly get the same transport portals to get out of the Coliseum and return to it."

"And like during the Broom Race, the river of the Scuola Regina will likely be used for the final sprint." The Champion of Desire finished.

"Yes, that too."

But when it came to the rest of the Task scenario, they were facing a big blank. Was it going to be like during the Fifth Task, when every Champion had to break the anchor and the chains of the flying broom, or was it going to be some other vicious stratagem?

For now, all the Champions were kept in the dark about it.

"I will admit I don't like at all the words 'treasure hunt' and 'adventure'," Fleur Delacour spoke in her singing French. "No treasure is left without protector or guardian. There are many creatures that can be used to guard shiny items."

Yes, there were. Dragons came to mind, though there were others. Sphinxes were infamous for it too, and they could grow to colossal sizes.

No, not to the size of the statue of the Sphinx near the Pyramids. But large enough to be as threatening as some middle-weight species of dragons.

Someone coughed behind them.

"Yes, Champion Romeo Malatesti?" she drawled with a bored expression.

"I understand your need to speak about the Seventh Task, really, I do," the former Champion of War began politely. "But there is a crowd of angry people coming this way, and they don't seem to be in a happy mood."

"That's because our ally the Champion of Fire torched their camp one hour ago." Alexandra promptly applied Rule One: in doubt, blame Delacour.

Childish? Maybe. But it was Delacour who had done it, after all.

"Err...yes." The dark-skinned Venetian student and former leader of the Doge Court cleared his throat again. "There are plenty of wizards with a myriad of non-magical mercenaries, and they all come to be crowned Champion of War."

"How horribly ambitious of them," the currently blue-haired Champion of Water giggled.

The wizard of the Scuola Regina didn't seem to enjoy the joke.

"Unlike some, I really lost the mantle, the privileges and all the advantages which come with being the undisputed Champion of a Power. Therefore I have *competition*."

"Yes, you have," Alexandra declared sarcastically. "But I'm afraid that if you expect someone here to cry for you, you're out of luck. I have forgotten my handkerchiefs somewhere between England and India."

"You're all horrible witches," Romeo Malatesti groaned.

"Thank you, dear," Lucrezia said sweetly. "We're making a lot of efforts to reach that threshold, you know."

The former 'Doge' groaned again very loudly.

Alexandra looked back behind her. There, cutting through the rain and the feeble light currently devoted to this isolated region of South America, a grey tower was waiting for them.

Although 'grey' and 'tower' didn't exactly do it justice.

It was the shade of steel, and it was akin to an arrow pointed at the very heavens.

And the reason it was that shade was that as far as they could tell from here, it was entirely made of steel alloys, or some metals so close you couldn't notice the difference.

"Let's be serious now," Fleur declared after a few more barbs and jokes. "Yes, flying brooms and carpets can't approach the Seal, and Apparition isn't possible. But the enemy is coming via this large valley, as if someone told them the precise coordinates at the same moment we got them."

"I believe you can thank Arianna Dumbledore, traitor Necromancer, for that."

"No doubt," the Phoenix of Fire replied calmly to her analysis. "But we have to stop them before they enter the Seal, otherwise it's simply going to be Chaos. And since we have to escort our Champion to it-"

"Go with him. Escort him to the Gate of this steel tower, Delacour."

The moment Alexandra had realised what the necromancer of the Dumbledore line had in mind, the approach had been obvious.

"I'm going to deal with the competition."

"Are you sure?" the Phoenix Animagus seemed to have been genuinely taken aback by her 'generosity'.

"She doesn't want to come closer than we are to the Seal of Metal, oh Champion of Prometheus!" Of course, Lucrezia had to ruin the moment...

Alexandra breathed out.

"Unlike some of you, I am a Champion whose connection is to the Dark, and with most Powers trying to return to their original Elemental Plane, it is not exactly like stability is at the order of the day. We did a ritual to give Metal to Strife, and it is good. But I am not risking my magic and my soul on the assumption we have everything under control here."

Lucrezia gave her an apologetic smile.

"I didn't want to be insulting, Alexandra. But you have to admit it, the wizards you're going to face brought a lot of meat shields. And all elements save Metal are going to be significantly weakened as long as the Seal is 'purifying' the magic of the local Ley Lines. You will be alone against a small army, and you don't have a big warship to support you. Or the Dark Queen of Durmstrang."

Alexandra breathed out in frustration.

"Lucrezia, I am the Champion of Death for a reason. You say they brought a small army to break us and conquer the Seal of Metal? I have a far different view of the situation."

"And what is this different view, pray tell?"

The Hydra Animagus bared her fangs.

"They should have brought far more troops, of course."

**21 April 1995, the Metallic Battlegrounds, Approaches of the Seal of Metal, Bolivia, South America**

Henry William was born in Boston, and had celebrated his seventieth birthday one month ago.

This was, incidentally, also the day he had celebrated the forty years since the day he had begun his experiments and passionate forays into the realm of Dark Magic.

Sixteen years ago, he had met Knight Necromancer for the first time, though the name wouldn't have meant anything to him until the revelations of the events at Venice.

Henry William had never regretted anything of the actions which had led him to increase both his magical might and his influence in society, up to the ninety-plus deaths that had consumed disloyal subordinates and unskilled spies.

Henry William wanted power, and Dark Magic had given him plenty of it.

The key, as always, was to take all the boons for yourself and ensure others paid the onerous prices.

Now?

Now the sky was the limit.

The ancient terrors, that the initiated called the Avatars, were no longer there to keep everyone in line.

Powerful wizards could at last come out of the shadows.

There was no need to respect the Statute anymore, for the Statute was broken. Forever!

There was no one to stand in the way of his ambitions, and Knight Necromancer, like plenty of other powerful beings, had acknowledged that as long as they had the might, they had the right.

But it was no good to rest on your laurels.

They were of the Dark, there was always more to claim, more to possess, more magic to discover and unleash in the name of might.

He had to become a Champion.

Why would he stop at being a mere wizard, after all, when it was possible to forge connections with a God?

"Remember," he told his second.

"We are ready, Lord William."

Nothing more needed to be said; the ambush was ready to deal with his 'peers' that happened to follow behind them.

It was already galling that these imbeciles had failed to stop the attack this morning; thank the Gods that aside from some uncomfortable end of night with their tents on fire, the damage and the casualties had been few and far between.

"We are-"

The rain stopped.

The sun, already close to invisible, seemed to withdraw entirely.

It was as if darkness was swallowing the land.

A greater shadow was conjured.

A greater shadow, but one with burning green eyes, ones that were often associated with Death Curses of a thousand existing and past civilisations.

"Alexandra Potter," Henry William cursed. Like millions of mages and non-mages, he knew the name of the girl who had been involved in the fall of the Avatars. "Your Seal is not here-"

"**This is your sole and only warning, you who kneel under the banners of Arianna Dumbledore**." The words seemed to come from the abyss itself. "**Leave and do not try to claim any Seals**."

If they had been anywhere near a Seal convulsing in the power of Lightning, Henry would have obeyed without question. But here?

He laughed.

"You have no power here, oh Champion of Death. Metal is growing in strength with every second, and you bringing another claimant only increased its range and potency! Your thunder will not illuminate the night, and you do not have an armada at your beck and call."

"**Is that** **your last answer**?"

"IT IS!" And Henry was not the only one to roar the next words. "MAGIC IS MIGHT! MAGIC IS WAR!"

The girl had tried to bluff, but it was useless. They were going to break through, push deeper into the valley, and seize the Seal of War, then-

"**Odala**."

The darkness faded away, and a white-pulsing Rune began to burn on a rock that the black-haired girl had just touched.

The effect was immediate: the rock transformed into a large two-handed sword, something vaguely looking like a claymore, if his memories about sword types was correct.

"Ha!" One of his rivals laughed. "You want to go back to the basics of sword-fighting? This is not-"

A second rock was transformed into a sword. Then a third. A fourth. The Runes pulsed, and spread more magic.

Dozens of rocks were transformed by the art of Transfiguration.

In mere seconds, the number rose to hundreds.

And then thousands.

It was unnerving...and it worked, *because each of these swords was made of metal, from the hilt to the edge*!

"**My first Transfiguration, you know, was to turn a matchstick into a needle. I didn't use the stone-to-metal transfiguration for many, many months**."

The expression they were given was one of royalty and utter deadliness. The green eyes stared at them, judging and delivering contempt in a sort of dark majesty.

"How? You can't have-"

"**I came here twenty-four hours ago to prepare the battlefield, obviously. WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA**!"

In a single spell, all the swords of the valley rose, and as the Transfiguration area expanded, these were tens of thousands of metallic swords manipulated by a single Dark Lady.

"You..." Henry William of Boston swallowed heavily. He stared at the green eyes, and all thoughts of begging for mercy disappeared. "You are still too weak and too inexperienced to stand against Knight Necromancer. She is going to break you."

"**I suppose the odds are not good for me**," the Champion of Death mused, completely ignoring the torrent of spells which were trying to kill her or to destroy her instruments of murder. "**But one thing is sure: you won't be here to see us face each other**."

Pain exploded in his body, and then Henry William realised with horror that a thousand swords had come out of the ground to impale all the army he had led into this valley.

A lot of blood was spilled, and his vision was fading.

But it did not fade fast enough to miss the rain of swords which fell upon them all, cutting and dismembering.

Many swords were breaking against their magical and metallic shields, but there were too many of them, and the weapons were exploiting ruthlessly every weak point in their defences.

Something horrible shrieked next to his ears.

And then Death came to have her due.

**21 April 1995, the End of War, outer approaches of the Seal of Metal**

By the time she returned, Lucrezia was greeted with the sight of half of the enemy army being dead.

That, to be fair, had been very predictable.

These power-hungry individuals had come for the powers of a Champion, accompanied by mercenaries.

It was always going to end in bloodshed and violence.

The biggest surprise, it must be said, was that half of the remaining army was still alive.

And that they were fighting each other, in some sort of weird wrestling competition, as if they weren't facing a Champion as their enemy.

Kicking, punching, roaring insults; there were hundreds of men and women mustered in the valley, and all were seemingly so angry they let their fists talk rather than use any kind of modern non-magical weapon.

"The moment I removed the wizard leaders, they began to behave like that," Alexandra Potter informed her, from the huge rock that she had chosen as her seat to observe the chaotic melee. "I think it's the influence of **Strife**."

"It almost certainly is, yes," if the Dark Queen was here, another explanation might be possible, but she wasn't. "I'm honestly surprised you didn't use the opportunity to finish them all."

The valley was shining as thousands of Runes carved upon as many rocks were burning in white fire.

And the impaled corpses of hundreds of men and women upon swords ensured the Succubus didn't need more than a few seconds to know how the slaughter had been accomplished.

"I didn't feel like killing these greedy imbeciles," the younger Champion snorted. "As tempting as it is, I can't remove all the stupidity of the world. And there might be some hired troopers who will talk. The wizards were in contact with Knight Necromancer."

"A few drops of Veritaserum on their tongues will certainly make them sing like canaries," Lucrezia agreed. "Whether they know something worthwhile, of course, is an entirely different question."

"True."

The Champion of Water observed the battlefield for long seconds before opening her mouth again.

"Nice combination of stone-to-metal Transfiguration and Ancient Runes. Of course, you couldn't have done it if you hadn't come here beforehand. So much for the ritual, no?"

"My Power told me the coordinates," the green-eyed Hydra Animagus admitted. "Obviously, the agreement was that I couldn't erect active defences or interact with the Seal in any way."

It was...brilliant. Many wizards would have tried to cast enchantments as far away as the Seal while making sure it blocked the approaches, but Alexandra Potter had just carved thousands of Runes into the rocks of the valley, and waited another day to imbue them with her magic.

It was time-consuming, yes. But there was no way it could be detected as long as no wizard came and examined the rocks one by one. And in the case they did, they would have only discovered a single Rune...it wouldn't have given them any clue about what the rocks were going to be transfigured into.

"Is it the new idea you want to test against Arianna Dumbledore?" the Champion of Tlaloc asked with a dangerous smile.

"No, I have something far worse in mind for her," the Champion of Death assured her. "Since you're here, I presume Delacour and yourself were able to escort Malatesti to the Seal successfully?"

"Yes, Alexandra, we were successful. Delacour is guarding the entrance of the Seal...not that it was difficult. Save one particular ambusher, there was no opposition."

Suddenly, Lucrezia had all the attention of the Champion of the Morrigan.

"What do you mean you had no opposition? There's a second valley which can lead visitors to the doorstep of the Seal! I saw it when I did my reconnaissance, and I watched it again when we arrived hours ago! It is the reason why I thought you two were needed as escorts for Malatesti!"

"Yes, I thought the same, but there was no one save this lone wizard. He was an Iguana Animagus and tried to hide in the rocks when it became clear he had no chance-"

It was not pleasant to see the face of a girl who had slain many, many elite wizards shift into an alarmed expression where worry fought panic.

"It was a trap all along. We should have waited for the Seal to move again."

"I'm not sure I follow you here, Alexandra. For the trap to have any chance-"

The ground shook extremely violently, and the clouds suddenly began to be blown away as if the mother of all storms was coming.

The screams of the wrestling battlefield ceased.

It might have to do something with the gigantic flash of magic which illuminated the entire region.

Three heartbeats later, it was gone.

But so was the Seal of Metal and Strife.

"The Seal would have to go in a location where the treacherous Knight Necromancer has prepared some ugly surprise for us?" the Hydra hissed in a tone that was definitely very sarcastic.

Lucrezia Sforza, Heiress of a long Succubus line and Pawn of the Exchequer organisation, for once forgot her dignity and made an ugly grimace.

"Yes," she breathed out. "Yes, all of that."

Why bother selecting a Champion of your own?

You just had to throw them all in a multi-sided competition, wait on the sidelines until the winner is decided, and then trigger the teleport to move the Seal to some other area, where once the new Champion came out, you would have the power to make him bend the knee.

"I'm beginning to think I want to murder Arianna Dumbledore." Lucrezia spoke acidly.

"Join the line," Alexandra Potter grunted, her eyes flashing as if they were the Gates of Death itself. "I was here first."

**22 April 1995, Demilitarised Zone, the land where War never ended, Korean Peninsula**

Evidently, it was a trap.

There was barely a second to acknowledge how cold it was – no mean feat since the rain of mountainous South America had hardly been warm – and then the anti-Apparition wards snapped back in place.

"I have to admit that it is a large welcoming committee."

"I see the Seal of Metal," Fleur Delacour spoke, ignoring her assessment of the situation. "It is not yet complete. We can still win."

"*No, you can't*."

The magically-empowered voice was eminently recognisable, though its owner was too far away even for her Hydra eyes.

"The former Knight Necromancer," Alexandra answered. "I am really surprised. Oh wait, I'm not."

By her side, Lucrezia sighed.

"Death, I know you're in a happy mood and all of that, and that you don't like the Necromancer...but could you please stop trying to taunt the madwoman with an army?"

The Succubus had a point.

Alexandra thought it over for five seconds.

"No, I don't believe I will."

"*A pity Ra didn't live for a few minutes longer. He could have taught you humility, daughter of James Potter*."

"I am what I am," the Lady Protector retorted. "And if you think mentioning my incapable progenitor is going to make me lose my self-control, don't worry, it won't. I have a plan, and I hope you have enjoyed this body, Arianna Dumbledore, because I am going to destroy it and send you back to your phylactery in a few minutes."

"*Because you dealt with a few mercenaries and some potential claimants to the title of Champion of War, you believe you stand a chance against me? RISE!*"

The army mustered all around them had already been significant. It was everywhere. It had left some five hundred metres of empty ground – the Exchequer's traitor knew better than to let Animagi like them come at close-quarters – but the rest of the landscape had already been filled with them. But once the command was given, more came out of the trenches and the holes where they had been hidden.

They were all Inferi, the corpses animated by a Necromancy that had both become almost a tradition among some Dark Lords, and yet remained some of the worst deeds ever performed by Dark Mages.

It was a tide of undead.

There had to be thousands upon thousands of them.

And the proximity of the Seal of Strife reinforced them, for the overwhelming majority had been soldiers while they were alive.

For this was the Demilitarised Zone between the two Koreas.

It was a land which had always been at war, though the intensity of the fighting had been very low since the 1950s.

But War was the absence of Peace.

And since the peninsula wasn't at peace, it existed to fuel the power of War.

"She must have accumulated this army over the last decades. Year after year, stealing them, stockpiling them battalion after battalion."

"Yes," Alexandra approved the words of Lucrezia. "And unless I completely missed the plot, the 'recruitment efforts' accelerated once the Statute was no more. While we were all dealing with the shakedown of the two Avatars' disappearance, she was abducting more and more soldiers of both North and South Korea."

And once in her claws, Arianna Dumbledore was transforming them into Inferi.

It would have already been bad by itself, but evidently, the breed of Inferi at the Necromancer's disposal were able to use the equipment that had been theirs while alive.

Which meant that their trio of Champions didn't just face an army of Inferi.

They faced Inferi with machine guns, artillery, tanks, and some obsolete war aircraft too.

"I count some fifteen thousand," Delacour spoke in this regal and annoying manner.

"*Now that we have established you stand no chance against my forces, I am going to tell you this once: surrender*." Yes, Arianna Dumbledore had the same 'I know better than you' voice that her brother was known for.

They had never met each other for years, but the ex-Headmaster and the Lich shared way too much in common for all they stood for the Light and the Dark.

"No."

And then Alexandra allowed herself to laugh like a hyena, before plunging her hands into her pockets.

\*\*\*\*

Some part of the Knight Necromancer wanted to believe the Champion of Death had lost whatever sanity she had left.

It certainly felt this way when the black-haired girl threw grey-coloured pebbles out of her pockets.

But there was some magic attached to them.

It could-

"WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!"

And the pebbles skyrocketed so high that in mere seconds they were lost in the night.

The magic flickering that was attached to it reached the edge of her sensing ability soon after.

"*Do you intend to transform them into swords again while I have my back turned, Champion of the Morrigan? I believe you will need a bit more than forty stones to do that*."

"I threw thirty-five of them, to be exact."

One could say a lot of things of the girl that had been chosen to be the Queen's Next Apprentice, but clearly lack of repartee skills wasn't one of them.

"*Oh, my mistake, thirty-five of them. Thirty-five swords against thousands of my Inferi. You are going to perish here, Hydra or not. Sooner or later, your regeneration abilities will fail, and your mantle of Champion will fall from your shoulders*."

A silent command, and her army began to advance.

"Do you not want to know where my pebbles ended up?"

"*Somewhere in the sky, I suppose*," the now independent Knight answered, not really caring.

"In fact, I sent the pebbles into the upper atmosphere." The British Champion corrected. "And no, they aren't supposed to be the recipients of sword transfiguration. They have been linked with bthe Eihwaz Rune. The key to transformation, you might say."

This was...intriguing.

"*You felt you wanted to use a single Rune on tiny pebbles to apply to them several effects. It remains limited, no matter how gifted you are. Stones aren't able to endure a massive number of effects, and the 'mother pebble' you will use can't handle more than seven, Arithmantic stability will make sure of it*."

"True. But I don't need seven. I only needed three. One to handle the levitation effects of Wingardium Leviosa." Fingers transformed into black claws, and the Champion of Death hissed an order to the daughter of Angelica Sforza. "The second was the ability to conjure an Incendio. And the third...the third was Engorgio. "

Some anti-Apparition Charms cast at extreme range began to fall, courtesy of the Water Champion. At the same time, the Phoenix Bitch unfurled her wings of **Fire**.

The Necromancer ignored it.

She ignored it because it made no sense.

"*Very well. Engorgio. The Growing Charm. By any calculation, you will be able to grow these pebbles that you threw by the dozens into large pieces that might be as big as your head. Do you think it will save you?"*

"These are pebbles I grabbed in a training room where I went boxing against an Ifrit. Your estimations are incorrect."

The Necromancer froze.

"I think that by now, they must have reached the size of a very nice car. And there are thirty-five of them."

She had been wrong. This Champion was utterly mad.

"*Your foolish girl, you have created* artificial meteors!"

"**Yes, I have. STAR. FALL**."

The night was suddenly illuminated by new fires of magic over her head.

"**OMEGA**!"

The Dark was now suffocating.

The wards suddenly all made sense.

And she had made the mistake of placing her ambush too far away from the Seal of Metal, in a zone where no one with a beating heart could be used as a hostage.

Thirty-five meteors.

One or two would likely be the death of her army; as it was, thirty-five was sufficient to raze everything in this part of the demilitarised zone.

War was going to end, by virtue of simple obliteration.

She didn't stay idle.

She mentally pushed her entire army, over thirty thousand Inferi, to go on an all-out offensive.

Hoping against all odds that they could kill the Champions before it was too late.

There had to be magical beacons on Alexandra Potter for the comet targeting to be accurate.

But it was too late.

The fire descended from the heavens.

It was too late.

And there wasn't even the excuse of the Statute to accuse her enemy of; had she not consumed both Korean armies to create her own?

Arianna Dumbledore snarled and threw her most powerful defensive magics around.

It wasn't enough.

There was an immense roar, the apocalypse of the burning rocks disintegrating upon impact.

The unpleasant sensation of having her body utterly disintegrated, to the point nothing was left of her.

The Necromancer lived.

Arianna Dumbledore lived.

But whereas the record of someone to resurrect oneself via a phylactery was of approximately seven hours, the magnitude of the destruction and the intensity of the magical assault meant hers would last over twenty-four.

The Lich would spend all that time cursing the Champion of the Morrigan.

"*You made your point clear, Champion of Death. It is you or me, and I am going to make sure you will perish for good during the Solstice*."

Yet she couldn't stop the shiver that shook her soul.

One couldn't forget the sight of an entire army being annihilated by meteors, Necromancer or not.

**Author's note**:

For some reason, I don't think many governments will thank the Queen of the Exchequer. It might have had the result of giving Knight Necromancer a defeat, but the collateral damage they can expect now with Alexandra...well, it's a bit extreme.

I admit I have not yet found a title for the next chapter, but as you can probably see where it's going, yes, it will be about the end of this battle and the fallout, including the political consequences of this cataclysmic attack.