**Chapter 88**

**Gifts and Runes**

**6 November 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

For those who seemed to believe the contrary, arriving late for breakfast didn't allow you to avoid the crowds.

Alexandra discovered it the hard way after taking her time leaving her swimming pool the day after the First Task.

"It is a bit flattering," Cho commented as the Potter Heiress began to devour the succulent Venetian pastries. Hydra Animagus or not, Alexandra loved all the sugar and the chocolate, whatever form the elite cooks had shaped them to be.

"It is a bit...concerning." Alexandra replied once her plate was empty. "I won a Task, not the Tournament."

"Wasn't it you who told us we shouldn't think what happened in the preliminaries would stay the same once the real thing began?" Morag smiled. "Well, you were right. And given the waves you made..."

Alexandra groaned loudly, something that didn't stop her red-haired friend from continuing.

"I'm not surprised dozens of journalists want to have long interviews with you. In one day, you went from a mid-level outsider to a very serious contender for the final victory."

"So they believe. I don't happen to share their opinion." Hermione raised both eyebrows and gave her a severe expression. "Don't look at me like that! In case anyone forgot, this Tournament has proven to be as dangerous as we feared, and if you fail and die, the Judges have proven they will add a zero next to your name. The current rankings are going to change a lot before this Tournament is over."

"Perhaps," Morag's voice was anything but convinced, "but you're still first today...and with a wide margin over the majority of Champions."

"Yes...over people like Hooper or Diggory...no offence to your boyfriend, Cho."

"None taken."

Honestly, the Basilisk-Slayer had been a bit surprised neither Geoffrey Hooper nor the darling of House Hufflepuff had a big monster-slaying spell in their arsenal. Brute force wasn't the answer to anything; Eleonora da Riva had proved it by handling the Griffin without violence and completing the Task. But there also was no denying that of the three other Hogwarts Champions, the one to hurl the most dangerous spells had been Warrington, not the one to have come from Dumbledore's House.

It would be stretching the truth to say Warrington would have done better than them if he had not drawn the Cockatrice, but after reading her friends' notes and watching the Omnioculars' recordings, Alexandra truly didn't know if Cedric or Geoffrey would have lasted longer than the Junior Death Eater did against the XXXXX-class Dark Creature.

Hopefully, the Judges had wanted to awe the public for the First Task, and would propose something as spectacular but less lethal than that during the Second Task...

And when one remembered who was behind the idea of the European Magical Tournament… the Ravenclaw Champion knew how low the odds of that truly were.

"Champion Potter, Headmistress Sforza and Judge Mohammed ben Qassim wish to speak to you outside."

"No respite from the journalists," the green-eyed witch told her friends before following the official.

The day was far less warm than it had been yesterday when they stepped outside. The sky was far cloudier, though it was several steps short of raining soon. Either they had been lucky the last week, or the powers-that-be had decided they had abused enough of the meteorological spells for now.

The crowd around her was large, obviously, and a few Professors and officials formed an informal 'honour guard' around her as they walked on one of the large moving bridges and then went into the gardens.

The black-haired teenage girl was about to open her mouth to wonder as to the purpose of this meeting when she saw several Judges gathered near bright patterns of blue flowers...and what had to be the most enormous doe in existence.

Suddenly, the reason why her presence was requested was limpid.

Alexandra had been a bit surprised yesterday no animal was presented as a gift given how many references and warnings there had been, but it appeared the 'presentation' was just a day late.

The obvious question was: what kind of species did it belong to? Alexandra had never seen the likes of it before. Its fur was a bright silver betraying its magical nature, and the golden horns were kind of pretty but-

"Champion Potter," one of the female Judges spoke, "in honour of your victory, we are proud to offer you this young Ceryneian Hind as a gift."

The girl who had fought a young sea snake yesterday had to fight the urge not to close her eyes or grimace.

Obviously.

Obviously, they had seen the Stymphalian Bird yesterday, she was a Hydra Animagus, so the 'irony' demanded the Third Labour of Heracles made an appearance. Add the Cerberus Hagrid possessed, and they had a very good 'Heracles' menagerie.

"I am honoured by this gift," the Victor of the First Task lied blatantly.

Seriously, what was she going to do about this embarrassing gift?

Unlike Fingolfin, it was obvious that the Hind was not young enough to be trained or imprint upon her.

This wasn't a pet. This was a...XXX or XXXX-class animal? She wasn't exactly sure, but anyway, this was an animal who could sprint faster than a cheetah and leave most animals, magical or not, in the dust when it came to endurance races.

Maybe the Maharaja of Mysore would have a solution?

Alexandra saluted the Judges, and then went straight to her new 'gift'.

"Don't worry, girl. We are going to find you a nice pasture and everything you might desire."

The Ceryneian Hind looked directly at her, and the British witch thought the Greeks were right to believe this was the favourite animal of the Goddess Artemis. From up close, the shade of the pelt did not look like silver; it was the essence of argent itself and the metal looked like a poor substitute. The same could be said about the eyes and the feminine horns, which looked like liquid gold blessed by some Power.

And this didn't properly fail to address everything, for this was a magical animal built for the most incredible speeds, always running, and if one could kill her, few would be able to keep up with her without the help of a racing broom.

"I am Alexandra, we are going-"

The Ceryneian Hind snorted fire. Not a lot, but enough for the closest journalists to take prudent steps back.

"Calm, girl. I am not going to hurt you. And you need a name. What do you say if I call you Ciri?"

Alexandra hadn't believed any animal would be able to look like an offended noble and give her a disdainful glance, but the Ceryneian Hind achieved it without effort.

The second snort arrived a second later, more powerful, and with more flames.

"Ciri, it is," the Potter Heiress went on to partially transfigure her arms under her robes, and went on to give a vigorous 'caress' that her new 'gift' would have avoided if she didn't hold her by one horn with one hand. The Hind tried to deliver a fire attack, but lightning sparkles played in her hands, and the Hind was suddenly more cooperative.

Right. Now what use would she be able to find for an animal which would try to escape as soon as she found an opportunity to regain her liberty?

**6 November 1994, Lyudmila's Villa, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

There had been many rumours which had spread about the titular Champion's villas. That they were bigger than those of Astrid and all other substitutes was a given; one had just to look at the valley heights to know that.

The rumours had understated how big and how much effort had gone into them, clearly. With the Space –Expansion Charms, the Dark Queen's lodging was easily three times bigger than her quarters. Suddenly, the 'palatial luxury' looked far cheaper than it had several minutes ago.

Not that the witch of House Sverre intended to become a Champion for the sake of having a bigger bedroom or a private ritual room, or anything like that. Astrid considered herself many things, but the kind to risk her life for bigger accommodations in a location she would likely never return to as soon as this Tournament ended was not one of them.

"No swimming pool?" Irina asked as the main warded area playing the role of balcony and sightseeing platform had a sort of small wrestling arena and not the pool Karamazov had boasted about when he was alive.

"It was an option, I declined," the best Durmstrang Champion after the First Task snorted. "We were given a huge shower, a huge bath, and many other things you can fill with water...and I don't love swimming enough to spend hours inside a swimming pool."

Astrid didn't comment, but deep inside, she wondered how many other Champions had made the same choice.

For that matter, she wondered how many boys and girls had brought additional decoration like the Dark Queen had. The purple carpets with enormous snarling wolf sigils, the skulls of monsters killed months or years ago, the trophies rewarded after academic and non-academic achievements had clearly come from Romanov, not from the Scuola Regina.

Something that didn't escape her eyes was how few paintings and photos there were, and the few which weren't Venetian showed the temporary owner of the villa doing something spectacular or standing victorious.

At least the room they were going to use as a study hall had very comfortable chairs and the table looked like something one spent a lot of money to acquire.

"Right," Lyudmila said, taking a regal position at the end of the table, in the only chair which looked more like a miniature throne than the average aristocratic chair. "Obviously, since I got my chaotic backside kicked in the First Task, we will do a sum-up of the significant things which happened in the Coliseum. Roksana?"

"First of all, High Master Karkaroff is extremely disappointed by your performance," the dark brown-haired witch said in a falsely hurt voice. "Of course, our great High Master is also particularly pissed off at Schumacher for failing utterly at what was supposed to be his specialty. And if Karamnov was alive, the insults he would receive...well, I think we would hear them from here, wards or no wards. The only one to escape his anger was Krum."

"Evidently," the Russian Champion added, "he's not going to criticise the Quidditch Seeker who almost won the World Cup despite having to play with a sub-par team. Karamnov's replacement?"

"It is going to be Boris Viipuri."

It took two seconds for the Dark Queen to link up name and her knowledge of said student. When she did, the expression was one of disdain...if one was particularly generous.

"Oh, right. Him."

"He is...patient." Irina said.

"The Finnish snipers have a reputation of patience," Lyudmila corrected, "Boris is just...slow. Last time I met him in Duelling, I wanted to let him cast a spell in order to see if he could do something interesting, but when he failed after two minutes, I wiped off the floor with him in ten seconds."

"Forgive me...Lyudmila...but isn't that kind of...behaviour...what led to your problems during the First Task?"

It was not pleasant to have the Dark Queen glare at you, even if it was only for a couple of seconds before her irises softened.

"You're right. I will take Boris seriously. I am still surprised Karkaroff chose him, though."

"The other possible choices were a bit too much like Pyotr Karamnov in his mind, I think," Katharina declared. "Maybe the High Master realised it would take more than to throw Dark Curses and hope for the best to win the Tournament. And he has Schumacher for the frontal attacks."

"That's confirmed, then?" Irina asked with undisguised curiosity.

"Yes, his parents appear to have paid the Healers for a confidential Blood Ritual or something like that to make his recovery faster. He will be participating in the Second Task...much like everyone who isn't dead, minus Delacour."

"And how strange it is that despite three deaths, none of them are your fault..." Roksana joked.

"I would have gutted the Veela if I had the time," Lyudmila grimaced. "Unfortunately, I was...busy, and the arena-handlers got her out before I could finish her. I will just have to hope she will come back for a Task when we will face each other. The journalists?"

"You haven't completely lost your aura of invincibility," her German lieutenant said, "but your prestige isn't the same as before the First Task. You're still among the top favourites, but you can't afford to repeat the same mistakes over and over. Regenerating from injuries which would kill anyone else is impressive the first time, but you can't rely on it for the Judges to give you a mountain of points. If you're able to get injured that much, it's clear there's a problem with your tactics after all."

The words uttered by the Dark Queen were Russian and couldn't be anything but insults, given how Roksana winced.

"All right. As everyone who had eyes could see, I was given the 'Tournament Clue' for the Second Task. Irina, it will be your job to decipher it."

The papyrus was levitated before the Ukrainian witch.

"Her Dark Majesty isn't able to read Hieroglyphs?"

"Her Dark Majesty has a Journeyman diploma in Sumerian Runes of Uruk, can cast over four hundred different Norse Galdr and Lokk, and can cast Runic evocations in five other languages, including Aztec Blood-Star tongue." Lyudmila replied acidly. "But Hieroglyphs? I didn't learn them. Though maybe I should have expected it, given the two Old Fossils were born in ancient Egypt."

"Right," the Blood Magic specialist frowned as she read the papyrus. "I can tell you it isn't just going to be a simple matter of translating the Egyptian language. No matter the order, the message makes no sense...there must be a cipher or something..."

The tall blonde witch turned her eyes towards her Russian patron.

"It's not going to be something done in a few hours. And I will certainly need to hire Hieroglyph specialists to help me."

Lyudmila didn't bat an eye.

"I will pay for it. I just want results...meaning I must have the Clue in a language I can read in time to do any good, not twenty minutes before the Judges summon us to the arena. Do you think you can do it?"

"I think so," Irina replied with determination. "But assuming I spend hundreds of hours on it, the normal classes will be more or less on hold for a month. Assuming I succeed, I will want several boons as a reward."

"You will have them." And for all the fear the Dark Queen inspired to them, Astrid knew her word would be respected, even if the Second Task saw a Wyrm invasion and Lyudmila was near-incinerated once more.

Katharina Feuerbach cleared her throat, getting rid of a lot of the tension which existed.

"I suppose that leaves one last question. Do we inform the other Champions of Durmstrang?"

There was a long moment of silence from the Dark Queen. In all honesty, Astrid was surprised it took her so long to make up her mind.

"Krum is rather good at Runes," Lyudmila Romanov replied thoughtfully. "I believe he trained with flying things of his own making before he got to the Professional Quidditch Teams and received the money for world-class brooms. I don't know if Hieroglyphs were among the Runic languages he mastered, but even if he doesn't, giving him a copy of the Hieroglyphs will help him...and Karkaroff will be happy I helped his precious 'Viktor'."

A carnivorous smile appeared on the aristocratic lips of the girl who had finished second of the First Task.

"I will tell him that under no circumstances is he to inform Schumacher or Viipuri of what awaits them on December 3."

"It's going to be sink-or-swim for them," Astrid commented politely.

"Then let them sink or swim on their own merits," the dismissal was immediate. "I bled to have that damned Tournament Clue...and my Power is not Charity."

**6 November 1994, Milan, Italy**

After the monumental fiasco which had just occurred, Henri had thought the 'invitation' would come from the Trinity's side. In the unlikely case it came from a representative from the Army of Light however, the Champion of Horus expected real humility and apologies. And in addition to those, a location which indicated the dire straits the Light was in would have been nice.

Instead, the summons had called him to meet in a secret headquarters right next door to the *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II* of Milan, which was one of the most crowded and remarkable parts of the ancient Italian city.

That alone was enough to be acknowledged as a bad omen. The presence of hundreds of mages who had come in traditional white robes over shining armour polished like mirrors did nothing to dismiss the bad feelings.

Twenty minutes later, Henri knew he should have ignored the 'invitation' and refused to delay his meeting with the Champion of Death. It was evident that the defeat – let's not pretend it was anything else – had not convinced the top leadership of the Army of Light or the Trinity that their methods were flawed.

"It is only a question of hours before we have a firm location of the Seal the Enemy has used. We already know its activation happened somewhere in the Nile Valley, and Strike Force Cathar will arrive in five hours. I'm certain that whatever devilry or monstrous deed the Elder Monster has done, we will be able to purge it and begin the reverting process."

The adult student of Beauxbatons wondered what kind of recent triumph gave the Knight of the Army of Light this kind of delirious optimism.

"Strike Force Antioch and Avalon are gathering as we speak too, and will intervene in case the problem requires more...decisive quarantine measures."

In other words, they would scorch the earth if Strike Force Cathar failed. On one hand, it was good someone was thinking about contingencies. On the other hand, the collateral damage done by these two Task Forces was rather...considerable. Henri had read many historical instances in the archives, some of them recent, where the 'liberators' had killed more people than the plans of the Exchequer would have murdered in a worst-case scenario.

"This is all and good," a member of the Trinity, one of the most rational wizards, rose from his seat and marched to the centre of the rotunda. "But it is like hunting the fox after he has devoured half of the hens! We need to find the Seals and destroy them before they are activated! Otherwise, the more we wait, the more Strike Forces will be engaged on multiple fronts and exhausted before what is no doubt the real plan of the Enemy is unveiled!"

"I have a better plan," the Knight of the Army of Light replied. "We kill all the Dark Champions involved in this Tournament. It's obvious the Seal is about one of those damned souls committing murder at a certain moment. Kill the Dark Champions, and the plan of the monsters will fail!"

Henri clapped his hands slowly, not bothering rising from his seat.

"Champion de Condé," the arrogant idiot growled threateningly, which did absolutely nothing to impress the French noble. Seriously, after the First Task, did the moron think raising his voice and presenting himself as an exemplar paladin of the Light was going to make him afraid. "You disagree?"

"Of course I disagree." The temptation to add 'idiot' or 'imbecile' was strong, but he resisted. It wouldn't have been diplomatic. "First, contrary to what you said, there is absolutely no reason to believe the death of a Dark Champion wouldn't have activated the Seal too. The Enemy has proven time and time again it is not shy about removing sharp tools if they risk cutting its fingers, and I see no reason why the Tournament would be any different. After all, why would they shed a tear except in one or two cases? The fewer Dark Champions there are at the end, the fewer potential enemies to their ambitions."

"This is not-"

"I have not finished." Henri used a tiny amount of power to shut the Knight's mouth. "The second reason why it's a fantastically bad idea should be evident to all. Lorenzo de Medici was hardly my friend, but I thought the manner of his demise should have convinced everyone in this assembly that continuing the attacks on the Champions of the Dark would be a painful form of suicide."

And the only reason why he didn't say 'certain suicide' was that Fleur Delacour was going to recover, in the end...though her absence today made him wonder what had happened. There were already certain rumours spreading about a 'conversation' between the Archmage and the Minister of France...

"Do you forget your vows so easily?" Another 'conservative' elder nearly jumped into action. "The founding principles of the Trinity are-"

"To protect the world from the Darkness, and so on," the Champion of Horus retorted. "I fail to see how making sure that Lorenzo was crushed to death by a young Leviathan achieved anything positive. Or how Fleur Delacour getting roasted by elemental lightning until near-death gave us an advantage."

"Evidently we didn't collect enough information about the Dark vultures. We just need to change our approach, maybe by poisoning them..."

"Are you completely crazy?" Eleonora intervened. "Lyudmila Romanov is a Fenrir Animagus! That form has a natural defence against anything poisonous, and then uses it to increase the venom coating its fangs! And even if by some miracle we had a poison that could kill her, what makes you think you have the skill to infiltrate my school and not be stopped before you reach the kitchens! The security detail is formidable, and if the Headmistress hasn't prepared against a raid or spies using Polyjuice, I am willing to change my name and go study in the middle of Amazonia!"

In any other assembly, this was a declaration which would have received plenty of support. Here? If twenty wizards and witches, not counting himself, nodded in approval, it was really an extremely good showing.

"Defeatist," another imbecile spoke, "but what could we expect from someone who smiled and stayed quiet when one of the most symbolic animals of Innocence was gifted to the black soul of Death?"

"Only someone who has never tried to tame a Ceryneian Hind would think it is a gift," the Champion of Vesta hotly retorted. "It was as much a message to the victor of the First Task as it was one for us. And I don't appreciate your tone, *Knight*. Unlike you, I descended into the Coliseum's arena and risked my life."

"You petted a Griffin and did-"

"Oh, was I not violent enough for you? You wanted to see-"

"What will it take for someone courageous to strike against the Dark? What is will-"

"Go ask your Light Champions how the direct approach worked? Oh, right. You can't and-"

"ENOUGH!"

The 'discussion' had been on the edge of complete chaos when the shout – powered by the Light – restored order.

"Enough," Archmage Ra repeated. "The outcome of the First Task has not exactly conformed to our plans, but it is intolerable to succumb to despair. We have a month to analyse what went wrong and to discover the weaknesses in the Enemy and the other damned souls' plans. We won't waste these days, and final victory will be ours."

Henri wanted to roll his eyes. Yes, like it was going to happen with a snap of their fingers. The Beauxbatons Champion didn't know the Animagi forms of Sforza and Potter, but he already knew he couldn't handle the Russian psychopath. Hell, even if he cast his most powerful spells, it was entirely likely the Tsar's daughter would endure his attacks and wait until he was utterly exhausted before giving him the coup-de-grace.

"And there is good news. While we will not have many Champions of Light to participate in the Second Task, the new Champion of Unity has been chosen. And he will be younger and more powerful than our martyr Lorenzo was..."

**6 November 1994, Art Wing, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

It couldn't be denied that Hogwarts had been soundly thrashed in the First Task. And if she hadn't won, the humiliation would have been far greater.

With that thought in mind, Alexandra was ready to affirm that the gap between the Venetian and the Scottish school was certainly ten times bigger when it came to the arts versus the 'traditional' magical teachings. After all, it wasn't Dumbledore's fault Hogwarts had only two Champions – one of which wasn't competing for now. But the non-support of the Defeater of Grindelwald for anything going beyond the school's choir could be thrown at his feet.

Obviously, in this domain like in plenty of others, the school hosting the Tournament had created something which was so far above Hogwarts it might as well be on the Moon. The classrooms were not so much classrooms but vast halls serving as artist ateliers, with wards allowing the students to control the luminosity, the environment around their artworks, and many other things.

The final result was an entire wing of the Renaissance-type castle devoted to artistry and teaching it to old and new generations. Overall, each hall seemed to be devoted to one type of art in particular, though it wasn't because you focused on jewellery that wood-carving was forbidden, far from it.

But it seemed that the 'classroom' in front of them, for example, was focusing on paintings, though the methods of using the pencil clearly varied a lot; there were boys who levitated ten pencils apiece while girls did their entire activity in a non-magical way, and vice-versa.

"Are they painting the events of the First Task?" Susan asked next to her.

"Yes," Lucrezia Sforza answered, visibly amused. "It was spectacular, I'm not surprised plenty of our best painters are already at work despite the two lesson-free days we have today and tomorrow."

"They're working fast," Alexandra remarked as she watched one boy near-adulthood frenetically paint what had to be the Stymphalian Bird versus Chimera class of the Fire Trial.

"Some of them must have begun the moment the First Task was officially over," the Succubus inspected her nails before looking at what had to be an enormous preliminary drawing of the Leviathan. "They're dedicated like that."

"Are you part of the Painting...Guild?"

"I know why you used the word, but we don't have Guilds like at Durmstrang. Each art classroom is more like a club with a group of senior students determining if a new student has the passion to join them."

"The passion...not the talent?" Alexandra noted.

"Talent isn't something one is necessarily born with. It's the dedication one pours into creating art which matters," the Champion of Lust explained convincingly. "And to answer your question, no, I do not paint frequently. I wasn't bad at it, but I found my interests lay elsewhere. I am a writer."

This surprised Alexandra, though the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Literature was a form of art.

"What sort of books are we talking about?" It was a vast field, really.

"The kind your Ministry refuse to authorise because the British are far too prudish." This time both Susan and she blushed.

"We're talking with a Succubus," Susan muttered. "We should have seen that one coming..."

"I heard that." The hair of their guide changed from blonde to a deep black, along with her colour of skin. "Does that mean I will soon welcome you into my literature club?"

Alexandra coughed as her girlfriend glared at the Headmistress' daughter.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We wanted to first know how this...'Arts class' works. The hours per week, the teachers, and everything else."

"Each student is given four hours per week in two sessions of two hours each when it comes to Art class. Of course, that's just the beginning; the classrooms are open to all club students after the end of the classes until midnight."

"And there's no problem starting two months after you all came back to school?"

"Not at all! The Arts Class is the course where we receive exchange students and foreign graduates from the rest of the continent all year along." Lucrezia began to walk out of the classroom and the two Heiresses followed. "The first weeks until the end of the year will likely be spent trying to give you an idea where your foremost artistic passion is. Everyone has one, and don't worry if it takes a lot of time, finding out what is hidden in your heart can't be rushed."

"And you have everything available? That must require an enormous budget!"

"Not really," the Succubus was prompt to counter Susan's fiery tirade. "You saw what we could do with our villas. A lot of end-of-the-year projects are purchased by benefactors of the art or former students of the school who...provide many art galleries with splendid works they wouldn't be able to find elsewhere. And it goes both ways. Many times, we have patrons who visit us and sometimes directly seek a gifted student to create some original artwork. It can be a set of porcelain tableware, it can be a painting, it can be something requiring several students' efforts like a necklace of gold and rubies..."

Or emeralds like the 'prize' the Victor of the First Task received.

"The Professors and the Headmistress oversee the contracts made, I suppose?"

"Along with the students' parents, the Lords of the House, and many more adults," their guide added. "It's in general proportional to the importance of the artwork, but every artist is at least protected by three to five adults inside and outside the school...no matter his blood status or his wealth."

It was true that at Hogwarts, assuming they had decided to create such a system in the first place, the pureblood students would have been placed on a pedestal while the doors would have been slammed in the faces of the Muggle-born...

"We will join the Arts Class," Alexandra said after exchanging a conversation in whispers with Susan. "Let just hope the Judges will give us time to enjoy ourselves."

"Yes, they didn't exactly give us an easy Tournament Clue, did they?" The Champion of Lust used her wand to reveal a passage hidden behind a tapestry. "I'm already trying to contact tutors via the contacts I have. Why couldn't it be Sumerian or Etruscan glyphs?"

"Perhaps because your supreme leader is Egyptian..." Alexandra sarcastically declared.

"Point taken. Still, that's an unfair advantage for Malatesti. He's been studying Hieroglyphs since he entered the school."

"Really? Not trying to make a diversion as to your magical skills?"

"You can ask him," the red-black lips twisted in a semi-sneer. "I'm sure he will boast about it in no time provided it's the right person who asks. He loves impressing dark-haired girls...I think it will be his death one day."

"No, thank you." Alexandra wasn't going to put Romeo Malatesti in the same category as Lyudmila Romanov, they just didn't inspire her the same level of danger, but the Champion of War wasn't going to be a friend either. The First Task had proven that while powerful, the Venetian boy was a berserker in the arena. He wasn't reliable, and if the Task went haywire, there was a non-negligible possibility he would turn against her. "And speaking of violent deaths. I suppose you are aware-"

"That my 'supreme leader' recreated Styx Vipers and unleashed them against the non-magical population of the Nile Valley? Yes, I am aware. My mother informed me after the First Task."

"It doesn't seem to bother you." The expression on Lucrezia Sforza's face was difficult to decipher, but it wasn't one of disgust or of betrayed anger.

"I don't see the Champion of Death Apparating to Egypt."

"Assuming I knew where to look for them...I have a feeling Ra would try to ambush me there. He can't touch me here, but I'm not exactly naive."

"Yes, the Grandmaster of the Assassin Legion is a bit unhappy at your continued existence," the Champion of Lust nodded. "Something you and I share, by the way. But to answer your accusation, my mother gave me many reasons why this Seal was triggered like it was and unleashed the Styx Vipers. Many of them are secrets of my organisation, but I was allowed to give you one reason should you ask: we are doing a great service to Egypt and the Egyptians as a whole."

"Excuse me? When the first of Spawns of Apophis begin to reach adulthood, the death count is going to be in the hundreds of thousands!"

"Millions," Lucrezia Sforza corrected. "The Styx Viper adapts its hunting frequency to the quantity of prey in the area. But the Egyptians really need it. If nothing is done, between the dams they built on the Nile and their ever-increasing population, the Muggle population is two decades away from starvation. There simply are not enough resources to feed a population of one hundred million men and women on a constant basis...not without causing a lot of land damage which will persist for centuries."

"And your alternative is to kill them until balance is restored?"

Sometimes, Alexandra was willing to recognise the Exchequer could sponsor some beautiful things like the Arts course of the Scuola Regina.

At times like that, it was almost evidence itself that the Dark Lords and Ladies were supporting things Dumbledore and his friends should have encouraged decades ago.

And then the veil hiding the darkness was broken, revealing all the ugliness behind it.

Millions.

Morrigan save her, if they managed to kill thirty million Egyptians with the Styx Vipers...by Sauron's dark soul, there were a lot of wars which had ended without even a tenth of that death toll.

And it was the First Seal. The First Task. It was likely something that had been destined to stay relatively invisible for a month or two, buying time for the Styx Vipers to reach their adult size.

"I will remind you, Alexandra," the Succubus purred, but took a step back when Susan growled as she came too close, "Ra is the one who regularly unleashes plagues which have wiped out entire civilisations."

"Ra is, as you said, the Grandmaster of an Order of Assassins. I didn't expect anything good from him." The Potter Heiress took Susan's hand in hers, and turned away.

*I expected better from you*.

The Basilisk-Slayer didn't utter the words, but she was sure the other Champion heard them.

**6 November 1994, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

The dinner between the Champions, their substitutes, and the Professors didn't take place in a villa. Even for the greatest houses, the 'dining halls' weren't that large, and one didn't need to be a Seer to know certain Champions would have refused inviting a few of their fellow students inside their quarters for the evening.

It couldn't be organised in a villa, and so it wasn't. Instead, the nineteen students and their Professors found themselves between two rivers, in the north of the Coliseum valley. Professor Dumbledore had conjured the large white tent, the chairs and the table, and the House Elves had brought dinner.

In a matter of minutes, it was like a miniature Hogwarts was gathered, though there was only one table, and as a result there was no separation between the Houses. Neville had Leo to his left and Ron to his right, but Malcolm Preece was in front of him.

This wasn't the only thing which was different from their school. The Elves evidently had many culinary talents, but they had to use the ingredients taken from the Scuola Regina, and pasta, pizza, and many other meals which were rarely found at the Gryffindor table back home were very common here.

Neville wasn't too fond of those changes, really. Leo shared his opinion. Ron totally disagreed, and many Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were in a similar mood, if the way they devoured enormous plates of pasta was an indicator.

However, these were minor problems. For the first time in days, they really looked like they were all part of the same school. Angelina was loudly proclaiming Krum's superiority as a Seeker to Alexandra Potter of all people, Cedric Diggory was politely chatting with Roger Davies about some complex point of Transfiguration, and Morag MacDougal and Blaise Zabini were trying to change the colour of each other's forks between each bite, with fluorescent results.

"Yes, Ciri is on her way to her new home," the Champion of Death said to Angelina, and Neville realised the Krum conversation had long been over. "Honestly, I don't know what I'm going to do with her. Ceryneian Hinds can't be traded between particulars; if I give her away, it will be to return her to the Hind Greek Preserve."

"That might be the best solution, no?" Cho Chang asked.

"Not really," the girl who had destroyed all opposition during the Water Trial shook her head, "once the mothers decide their young are sufficiently old enough to survive without their assistance, they are...violently chased away. There's a reason why in the mythology, the doe Heracles is ordered to capture is thought to be a unique godly creation, and it's not because Hind solidarity is a thing."

"At least it's not an animal too expensive to care for," Tamsin Applebee remarked.

"No," the green-eyed girl smirked. "On the other hand, I now dread the idea of winning the Second Task. The Judges and the host school chose the Ceryneian Hind to be the 'white elephant' of the First Task. It's a really beautiful animal, don't get me wrong, even if each time I call her Ciri, her sends me the look of 'how dare you give me such a plebeian name, filthy human'..."

At least half of the table burst in laughter.

"But I am almost afraid of what the Judges have in mind for the winner of the Second Task."

"If they want to go with Greek mythology, there's the Cretan Bull," Hermione Granger pointed out after drinking her Butterbeer. "We already had the Stymphalian Bird and the Cerberus."

This began a game where each student near the conversation tried to say a magical species' name, the 'rule' being that your choice was as unsuitable possible as a pet while remaining in the realm of possible. No Cockatrice or Dementor, please.

Neville had just proposed the Niffler – they demolished everything inside a home when someone had the bad idea to leave them inside – when Professor Dumbledore stood and the conversations quickly ended.

"I am happy that to see you all here in good health-"

"We aren't all here," Graham Montague acidly interrupted. "Or did you forget that *minor detail*, *Headmaster*?"

"I was going to speak about the tragic death of Champion Cassius Warrington, yes." Their Headmaster gave a very disappointed look to the Slytherin Champion. "Nobody deserves-"

"He died because you resurrected the Tri-Wizard Tournament! He died because of you!"

There was some cunning in the eyes of the Junior Death Eater, but as far as Neville could hear, a lot of the anger wasn't feigned.

"Shut up, Montague."

And a lot of the substitutes, himself included, widened their eyes, because the order had come from Alexandra Potter.

"I didn't think you were the kind to lick the shoes of this Muggle-lover, Potter."

"I am not, Death Eater." Neville was amazed a voice could be so close to a freezing hiss. What was Montague thinking, antagonising her? "I was remarking that it isn't the fault of the Headmaster if Warrington decided to commit suicide by Cockatrice. Since Ravenclaw research has not proved beyond doubt that your stupidity isn't contagious, be a good pureblood and shut up. Otherwise I am going to begin considering if Slytherin needs to lose a *second* Champion during the next Task."

Montague didn't like that at all...but after a few seconds, realised the order-giver and the person who had killed a Champion by Leviathan-throwing were one and the same.

His face was an interesting shade of red and purple when he began to sulk. But at least he didn't say one more word.

Professor Dumbledore announced a minute of silence in the memory of Warrington, and all respected it, even if a lot of people rolled their eyes.

A minute and a half later, the topic shifted to a far more important subject: the Second Task.

"It will take place on the third day of December," the only Black Witch of Hogwarts simply confirmed the knowledge which had spread in the last twenty-four hours. "It will begin at the same hour, though there will not be as many ceremonies as there was for the First Task. But it will be at the same location, the arena inside the Coliseum. Obviously that leaves a...near-infinite range of terrains and things to do."

"Yes, unless we have the 'Tournament Clue', we can't predict what we will face." Cedric agreed before giving her an ironic smile. "Speaking of which?"

"The Tournament Clue is a papyrus covered in Hieroglyphs, which given my inability to properly translate it, has been ciphered in a complex manner by the Judges."

"Hieroglyphs? Runes?" Geoffrey wasn't happy, something Neville shared, suddenly aware of how problematic the choice of taking Divination and Care of Magical Creatures was proving to be...

"Yes, Runes," the Champion of Ravenclaw inclined her head before continuing. "I can't promise the Task itself will be about Runes or about Hieroglyphs only, of course."

"That would be for the best," Cedric replied. "I took Runes, but I didn't choose Hieroglyphs for my NEWTs. The Norse Runes were already complicated enough...Geoffrey?"

"I had to abandon Runes after OWL year," the Champion of Gryffindor reluctantly admitted. "I only received an 'A' in the theory and practical exams, and Professor Babbling demands at least an 'E' to continue. But I studied essentially Elder and Lesser Futhark. I never touched Hieroglyphs."

"And Graham was told to not come back after his first year of Runes," Theodore Nott spoke with a nasty smirk, the other Death Eater giving him an expression of pure hatred for this 'betrayal'. "In other words, our Champions are more badly outmatched than they were during the First Task."

"I don't know if I'm ready to go that far," Alexandra Potter's eyes were rather predatory when she looked at the Nott Heir. "If it's Hieroglyphs only, it will be essentially a matter of luck: no one, not even a Rune prodigy, can do more than learn a quarter of the basic glyphs of the Egyptian Runic Language within thirty days. But I don't think the Judges will do something so arbitrary and so dependent on luck."

"You think they will have prepared a Task which allows every Runic language...or at least the most common scripts." The Hufflepuff Champion proved he wasn't only a 'pretty boy'.

"That's my opinion..." The Leviathan-thrower grimaced. "But I could be wrong. After all, I'm not a Judge."

How reassuring.

"I'm going to ask for an expert's opinion tomorrow. I hope I will have better news next evening."

"And...err..."Geoffrey cleared his throat. "If you manage to decipher it, will you give us the Clue?"

"Maybe," the Ravenclaw Champion smirked. "It all depends on the format chosen by the Judges, no? If the Second Task does not pit the students of a same school against each other, there won't be any problem. If it's everyone for himself, it will be a very different affair. And in the end, if I choose to reveal it to you, I will demand a favour in exchange."

"A favour?" the older Gryffindor asked warily.

"Nothing too onerous. Just a minor Oath that if you obtain a Tournament Clue I don't have in the not-so-distant future, you will be honour-bound to give it to me."

"That's ridiculous!" Montague shouted. "You don't have the right to dictate your conditions to us!"

It didn't escape the Boy-Who-Lived that all the Professors, including the Archmage and Mad-Eye Moody, hadn't said a single word against it.

"Except you, Montague," the Black Witch returned to a bored expression. "I don't help the followers of Voldemort. Unless you get rid of that ugly tattoo on your arm, it will be a very sunny day in Pandemonium when I decide to trade favours with you."

**7 November 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

If Dumbledore was here, Daphne knew the man would probably have a heart attack seeing the hundreds of boys and girls going to class reading today's *Loud Duck*.

The newspaper was still forbidden inside the school, after all.

But the silver-bearded ex-Chief Warlock was far away in Venetia, and in his absence, no one cared very much about respecting his 'law'. Well, no one save Filch and McGonagall, but the latter was so busy with her classes that unless you were stupid enough to read the *Loud Duck* in Transfiguration class or in the middle of the Great Hall, you had nothing to fear.

Predictably, the 'anonymous journalists' hadn't exactly been complimenting Dumbledore for Hogwarts' performance during the First Task.

Page seven's main title was rather...eloquent.

**WAS IT A GOOD IDEA TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS TOURNAMENT, HEADMASTER?**

The other articles' headlines weren't complimentary for him either.

**NO HELP AND FEW VICTORIES**

**ONE DEATH AND TWO OUTMATCHED CHAMPIONS: UNDERWHELMING HOGWARTS**

**NO THE PRELIMINARIES WEREN'T ENOUGH TO PREPARE THE CHAMPIONS**

"My favourite is the article on Warrington and his stupidity," Tracey told her, her own version of the newspaper opened as they walked to Professor Flitwick's class. Daphne rolled her eyes and opened to page 11...and she had the urge to facepalm.

**DANCE WITH A COCKATRICE**

"Someone should tell Lovegood to stop trying to be funny."

"Come on, it's fun!" Tracey was far, far too energetic for her own good. "I mean 'Ravenclaw wins the laurels in Leviathan-throwing' is excellent! And there's Gryffindor's flames in the barbecue! And then-"

"Yes, yes, I read the first pages, thank you. Do you-"

"Err...Alexandra is coming behind you."

"Don't be ridiculous," the Slytherin blonde scoffed. "She is in...Venetia..."

But as she turned her head, the Greengrass Heiress saw that indeed, the green-eyed girl who was her unofficial leader was running up the stairs, the groups of Hogwarts' students gaping openly at the sight of the Ravenclaw Champion.

"How?" She managed to utter.

"I can Apparate, remember?"

"There's at least a thousand miles, even Dumbledore doesn't-"

Dumbledore didn't Apparate like that, but evidently the Champion of Ravenclaw did.

"Enough about our infallible Headmaster," if her tone was more ironic, it would soon rain cauldrons on the castle. "I just spoke to my Head of House, you're exempted from the Charm's morning lesson. I want you to come with me to speak with Professor Babbling."

"Can I come too? Can I come too? Can I come too?"

"Yes," the black-haired Champion placed her hands over her ears. Obviously, winning a Tournament Task was far easier than 'handling' Tracey Davis.

"This is about the Second Task, isn't it?" the teenage girl of House Slytherin made it more an affirmation than a question, as they turned left into a corridor instead of continuing straight to Charms class.

"It is," Alexandra nodded. "What betrays me?"

"No offence, you're a good student and everything, but even for a dedicated student, you won't Apparate over a thousand miles just because you're feeling nostalgic about Hogwarts. And if it was something important for your studies at the Scuola Regina, you would have waited for a few days. There's only one thing where you are really on a very tight schedule, and that's the Tournament."

"Very good reasoning. Yes, it's about the Tournament Clue. And yes, the limited time is the reason I'm doing this early on Monday morning. Well, that and we only begin classes tomorrow at the Scuola Regina. Better to use the free time optimally."

"The Gryffindors wouldn't do that," Tracey quipped.

"No," the Ravenclaw witch smiled. "They would party most of the month and then really begin to worry about the clue one week before the Task. And then when everything had failed, they would run to the Professors forty-eight hours before they're due to step into the arena. At least for the Second Task we're skipping the problem: Gryffindors and Slytherin didn't succeed in grabbing the Clue during the First."

"Hmm...true. So what is it about?"

"Hieroglyphs."

Daphne raised an eyebrow.

"I see why you want to see Professor Babbling, she is the Hogwarts specialist about it. But why me? You have a Runes Professor at your disposal, and Susan is as good as I am on the subject, maybe a bit better."

"I hope Professor Babbling is going to help me, but evidently, she is a Professor, which means her time is limited and anyway there's a need to avoid accusations of partiality. You, on the other hand..."

"Your girlfriend is still better than I am. Or do you fear she will give Diggory everything you discover?"

"Not really," the victorious Champion passed a hand through her long black hair. "It's just that House Bones doesn't have any interesting books on Egyptian Rune Curses. A weakness I feel House Greengrass doesn't share."

"Oh, excellent idea!" Tracey was not jumping in joy, but she wasn't far from it. Had someone accidentally poured sugar in her drinks at breakfast?

"No, it's not." At this rhythm, she was going to have a massive headache before the morning was over. "You know why I didn't let you borrow those books, Alexandra."

"Yes, I know. Egyptian Curses and everything they created are essentially one of the most powerful repertoires of offensive Curses and other Maledictions ever developed...but it is also a very, very slow arsenal to wield. There's a reason why the Romans under the Caesar destroyed the armies of the last Pharaohs like it was training day, and it wasn't because the local wizards were not motivated."

"Oh..."Tracey bit her lip. "That's why most of your war spells are Roman or Norse in origin, right?"

"That's one of the reasons, yes. That those two civilisations were big on elemental spells help too."

"Since you have not forgotten these problems, may I know the reason why you've suddenly decided to study Egyptian Rune-offense?"

"Roman combinations of Runic spell require a wand to be cast."

"Yes, obviously," Daphne answered in a heartbeat. "It is-"

The Greengrass Heiress paused, her face paling at the horrible idea.

No, the First Task had already been a bloodbath with three deaths, surely they weren't going to throw them back into the arena *with no wand*!

"They can't...it would be suicide to not give you a wand!"

"It would be a suicide not to give us *a focus*." The expert in ridiculously dangerous situations corrected her. "I could be wrong. Unlike some people, I never pretended I am omniscient. But I have the bad feeling since I was given time to think about the 'Clue' how explosive and 'amusing' it would be for the spectators if everyone was given a similar Athame or another type of runic-carving focus before being told to enter a labyrinth filled with lethal traps."

"That..." before the First Task, Daphne would have said that surely Dumbledore wouldn't allow them to get away with it. But the 'spectacle' had happened, and Cassius Warrington, the idiotic Junior Death Eater, had faced a Cockatrice. What Alexandra Potter hinted at was not that ridiculous compared to that. "Fine, I see your point."

"I am glad you did." The Potter Heiress replied without a trace of irony in her voice. "Without a wand, it's far too risky to cast something like the Imperial Thunder or another variant of it. Not that I intended to anyway, it would be too predictable."

"Something tells me you're going to learn other war spells Dumbledore doesn't want anyone to learn."

"Guilty as charged," the interested witch nodded without any remorse. "So, can I ask you this favour?"

"I...I'm going to ask my parents." Daphne admitted. "We have three old books of Runic spells which are likely the answer to what you seek, but they're protected by vicious defences, and I haven't even open them once. In general, underage students of House Greengrass don't have to learn these kind of nasty incantations. I will warn you that whether you want to owe me a favour or not, my parents will likely insist the time you spend studying them is limited, and that you do all of it where I can watch you."

To her relief, Alexandra nodded thoughtfully.

"I understand, if these books are truly unique or very close to it, one doesn't want to risk thieves or other criminals getting their hands upon said books."

"It's not just that..." The Greengrass Heiress hesitated, but then it wasn't like Dumbledore had a lot of doubts about the Ravenclaw Champion anymore, no? "These books were gathered by one of my ancestors when he travelled to Egypt with a Dark Lord's entourage. Like I said, I didn't open those books, but I went close enough to them enough times to feel...how do you say it? Ah yes, they reeked of Dark Magic."

The rest of the time needed to reach Rune class was Tracey pestering Alexandra for more information about the spells and the tactics she employed during the First Task.

Once properly invited into the classroom by Professor Babbling, it didn't take a lot of time for the older witch to work frenetically on a translation of the mysterious papyrus.

"Extremely ingenious!" their Professor of Ancient Runes exclaimed after ten minutes. "It is an enigma within an enigma! You see the three cartouches at the heart of the message?"

"I do." Alexandra said cautiously. "I thought them being empty was some kind of method for the Judges to monitor our progress."

"They are...and they aren't." Professor Babbling revealed, still very excited. "I think that the cartouches are linked to a subtle Runic Lokk inside the message. Write the correct names in them, and the message will instantly change to reveal the true 'Clue' you need to prepare for the Tournament."

"Sounds logical," the Ravenclaw witch approved. "But...what sort of names?"

"The text is particularly explicit once you remove the glyphs used in the Lokk," Babbling pointed at different symbols which apparently had little in common with each other. "'Those who fight by the side of Osiris and Ra in the Eternal War."

Daphne knew enough about the green-eyed Champion to know she had almost frozen before making a large grimace.

"The Gods. The Gods of the Light and Darkness." The second grimace was larger than the first. "The Egyptians had hundreds of Gods."

"And you have limited chances before the cartouches are unusable," Professor Babbling threw a little more bad news into the mix. "Seven, I think, for it is the most stable Arithmancy combination for a Runic enchantment like this one."

"Someone should have selected a different name than 'Tournament Clue'..."

**7 November 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

Since she had planned to eat a quick lunch at Zabini Manor and warned Morag and Hermione she was doing so, Alexandra had not expected anyone to wait for her near the Apparition point at the Scuola Regina when she came back at two in the afternoon.

Yet there was one person waiting for her, and it was impossible to miss him.

Maharaja Raja Wodeyar X wasn't exactly discreet at the best of times, and the traditional Indian-themed clothes attracted a lot of attention, even in a school as artistic as the Scuola Regina was.

"Your Exalted Highness, waiting for me in person wasn't really necessary."

"Your Exalted Holiness, Sword of the End," the Maharaja saluted back. "I humbly disagree. You won me the equivalent of fifteen million Galleons with your victory, I think spending a few minutes of my time here is anything but a waste."

He had won fifteen...million...Galleons...

Alexandra's brain almost crashed under the shock. Seriously, who was gambling sums that high?

Okay, that was the wrong question to ask. The answer was clearly 'a very wealthy wizard aristocrat of India'.

"I see. I was unaware you could bet so much on a single bet."

"Oh, it wasn't a single bet," the ICW Delegate promptly 'reassured' her. "I gambled with several of my political opponents you would win the First Task, that you would permanently eliminate one of your fellow Champions, and that you would complete the Task in less than ten minutes. Among other things."

Alexandra blinked. The second and the third were rather reasonable, logically, given the enmity between her and the Light and the last thing she needed was to try to beat older Champions in a game of attrition. The first, however...

"You had more confidence in my victory than I, honestly," the Champion of the Morrigan admitted. "Even if the rules didn't forbid it, I wouldn't have gambled a significant sum on my victory twenty-fours before the First Task."

Completing the Water Trial and grabbing the Tournament Clue? Yes. The Judges grading her in the top five of the Tournament? Yes. First place? No.

"As I said, thank you for the vote of confidence," the Potter Heiress continued. "But I will warn you not to repeat it for the Second Task. I am far from certain I will be able to repeat the feat."

"Does the fact that the Second Task is about Hieroglyphs cause such an insurmountable problem?" Raja Wodeyar asked with non-feigned curiosity.

Alexandra frowned.

"One of the Champions speaks too much."

"The Champion of Ares," the Indian wizard revealed. "He was...very vocal two hours ago in front of most of the Champions and a large part of the Scuola Regina student body."

"Great. Save the nocturnal students, everyone will be aware of what he said before dinner, if not earlier. I fail to see why he did that, though."

"Getting under the skin of his opponents, most likely. The bloodthirsty boy boasted he was a prodigy in the field of Hieroglyphs."

Perhaps Lucrezia Sforza had told the truth, ultimately. That said, her words had been 'he learned them since he entered the school', not 'he was a prodigy'...

"Interesting. Well, assuming he's not lying, Romeo Malatesti is going to be the favourite of the next Task. Assuming it's only about doing Hieroglyph magic, of course."

"You have doubts on the subject." The advisor which had been imposed on her by the ICW said thoughtfully.

"Imposing Hieroglyphs and only Hieroglyphs for a single Task would be an incredibly partial move," Alexandra had thought about it a lot in the last hours as she read a book to Fingolfin. "The Tournament Clue being in Hieroglyphs can be acceptable. According to the rules, we can be helped by our tutors, the Professors of our school, our magical guardian, or even go further by...respecting one of the older Tournament traditions."

Which was cheating, in case you were historically ignorant.

"I understand your point. It's impossible for someone to learn a Runic language in one month, so the Judges won't ask it of you."

"Yes. Runic languages, plural, on the other hand...they are fair game. The Headmistress told us over a year ago at the Hofburg that Runes were one of the main magical classes which would be tested in the Tournament. The Clue will advantage those who have assiduously studied Hieroglyphs, but provided you are good at Runes, the other Champions will have good chances of winning the Task."

It was the more reasonable and logical scenario. And it wasn't good for her. She had studied Runes for hundreds of hours last year, but the Ravenclaw Champion had to be realistic: in the noble subject of Runes, she was just a beginner.

Power mattered, obviously, but if it came to something which didn't allow wands, the advantage was going to lie with age and experience.

"Your ideas are pragmatic, I will listen to your advice," ah, good to see the Maharaja wasn't eager to lose his entire fortune on ill-placed bets and risky gambles. "Do you need something my informants and vassals can possibly provide you?"

Alexandra opened her mouth to answer negatively. India must have a lot of Runic magic, but the problem others faced with Hieroglyphs would be the same for her with any Asian language; not enough time to practise something more than the easy basics.

But another thought materialised in her head. One which had nothing to do with Runes, and everything to do with the possible Egyptian theme announced for the Second Task.

"As a matter of fact, there is. Do you know how many magical preserves are owned by the...priesthood currently ruling from Alexandria?"

"I do." Raja Wodeyar smiled. "There is only one."

"I would deeply appreciate the list of species they could...deliver to the Scuola Regina for the Second Task."

"I am going to relay your desires in a few minutes," the orange-gold-clad wizard swore. "But assuming that they avoid the endangered species, I know their preserve has only one species to sell in abundance."

"And this species is?" Alexandra knew it was going to be bad, because no one, except a member of the Exchequer, should know the most famous export of a magical preserve thousands of kilometres away.

"Their giant crocodiles."

**7 November 1994, Alexandra's villa, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"How happy was the Ceryneian Hind?"

"Ciri is a delight to live next to," Alexandra said sarcastically. "The moment all her food was eaten, she tried to snort fire in my face."

Morag burst into laughter.

"Glad you are so amused by it..."

"Come on, Alex. It's funny."

"No, it's not." And she had to partially transform and breathe lightning to show the Hind who was the superior predator. 'Ciri' had been more docile afterwards...who was she kidding, she had just run to the other side of the enclosure and decided to ignore her.

Bloody Ceryneian Hind.

"Yes, it is."

This wasn't a battle she was going to win, and so Alexandra did the mature thing: she deliberately acted like Morag had been struck mute – thank you, Silencing Charm – and turned to speak to Hermione.

"How many books can you borrow in the Scuola Regina's main library?"

"Twelve," the Ravenclaw bookworm answered as expected. "You want me to borrow what is available on Hieroglyphs?"

"No. Professor Babbling gave me two dictionaries for that, I don't need them. What we need is to play psychological warfare, since Malatesti opened the 'game' while I was away."

"That's good," the ex-Gryffindor nodded, "because the best books which speak about Hieroglyphs have all been taken. The new Venetian substitute, Schumacher, two Beauxbatons students...what the Champion of War said made a lot of Champions and non-Champions run to the library."

"Good."

"Not good," Morag croaked as her Charm broke. "They know your Clue is about Hieroglyphs and will prepare contingencies."

Alexandra sighed.

"Morag, Hieroglyphs is a field so vast that I doubt that anyone save the King of the Exchequer and his Light brother have really mastered...well, one mastered the Dark field and the other the Light. You can prepare all the contingencies you want, it's not going to be very useful. They only have one month, it's not like you can learn a lot of evocations in thirty days when there are thousands of basic evocations. In fact, the conversation with the Maharaja was illuminating on the subject. After all, if Malatesti is playing mind games, why wouldn't the Exchequer and the Judges be playing their own too?"

"You think they are trying to make all Champions focus on the Hieroglyphs when it is about something entirely different?" Hermione refilled the large quill in her hands with ink.

Alexandra shrugged.

"When it comes down to it, we aren't even sure it's about Runes, never mind Hieroglyphs. The only way to know for sure is to decipher this damn Clue. And for that, one doesn't need a book on Hieroglyphs. I need a book giving the complete and definite list of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses which were worshipped since the dawn of Egyptian civilisation."

"That's a tall order, Alex."

"I know. And there is one more fun part. Since there's always a possibility Malatesti is lying through his teeth and trying to convince the other Champions and myself to make an error which will allow him to solve the Tournament Clue...we have to play psychological warfare too."

"And how do we do that?" Morag was definitely amused again, good.

"We can borrow twelve books each, no? We just need to borrow as many books as possible on the different aspects of Egyptian culture. The book on the deities of Egypt must be only one of dozens we take. That way if Romanov or someone else tries to figure something out from us, they will have to read all the books one by one."

Experience was the greatest advantage of older Champions, Alexandra wouldn't shed a tear if they spent a few white nights until the Second Task.

"It's going to be hilarious," the Irish witch agreed. "I fully support your new 'mind games', Alex. Do I have your permission to borrow a book on hippopotamus breeding?"

"Sure. And while you're at it, take the best work on crocodile species too." The Potter Heiress grimaced. "I have just been reminded that Morgana La Fay owns the biggest crocodile preserve of Egypt, not that I forgot the saurian monstrosity I saw two Samhain night ago."

"Crocodiles?" Hermione gasped. "Just to align with the Egyptian theme?"

"I am not the one who decided to organise a naumachia in the Coliseum to make sure the Venetian Coliseum lived up to its Roman counterpart's reputation." The Hydra Animagus noted.

"No, you aren't." Morag swore a lot of impolite words in Gaelic. "All right. Egyptian Gods you said?"

"Seven tries, my new translations confirmed that. And I swear if the answers are Osiris and Ra for two of the three the cartouches, I am going to kill someone..."

**7 November 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"Do you have an idea about how to kill the Dark Queen?"

As far as questions went, Eleonora mused, it had the merit of being clear.

"No," Henri shook his head. "Before the First Task, I would have said we would have to overwhelm her regeneration capabilities. Strike her with the most powerful spells at our disposal. But your lightning attack had enough power to kill a XXXXX-class creature. By all rights, she should be dead."

"And yet she lives." The Champion of Death kept her eyes on the sun taking in the flamboyant red minutes before setting for the day.

Neville Longbottom coughed.

"Shouldn't we be more...focused on the Exchequer?"

"We can't do anything to inconvenience the Exchequer," the most dangerous Champion of Hogwarts snorted, "unless one of you can promise me Ra is ready to swear an Unbreakable Oath he won't try to kill me the moment this Tournament is over?"

"This isn't-"

"Or at least not send his assassins if I go to Egypt solve the minor problem of a culling of the non-magical population?"

"He won't," the Champion of Innocence declared for the sake of formality.

"And since he has his priorities, some of which are to murder me, I don't see why I shouldn't keep an eye or two out for the daggers of the Light he is no doubt busy preparing."

Eleonora really wanted to say the Archmage wasn't that petty. Unfortunately, the more time she spent in the presence of the Light Avatar, the more the Venetian witch acknowledged how much the ancient leader of the Trinity had in common with the radical philosophies espoused by the Army of Light.

"It is...complicated."

The expression she received was sympathetic, but there was no naivety in those brilliant green eyes.

"Put yourself in my place. The only people it is possible to have a polite conversation with in the entire 'Light side' are you three. And you are very close to the Archmage."

"One could easily argue," the British Champion of Fate replied, and before he finished the sentence, Eleonora knew it was going to be a big mistake. "You are too close to the Exchequer."

To her pleasant surprise, the girl who had slaughtered Fleur Delacour and Lorenzo de Medici didn't explode in anger.

"Yes. One could easily argue that, with my mother being a member and all of that. Of course, there's a huge difference between you three and me. *I am not part of the Exchequer*." The last affirmation was nearly hissed like a true snake.

"But-"

"She's right." Eleonora stopped the younger wizard. "We're dancing around the subject, but Champion Alexandra Potter is right. We have committed ourselves to the Light, and sworn partial vows to the Trinity. We can be honest and say that if Ra had returned after the day we turned seventeen, we would have sworn the full vows...and this conversation wouldn't happen in the first place."

She received a nod of respect in return. It was...not bad. At least not every bridge had been burned with the First Task. Or rather it would be more accurate to say no new bridge had been burned?

"The only point I don't really understand is why you think the Champion of Chaos is such an immediate threat?"

"In case you forgot, she tried her best to kill me during the Task. Or was the Dark spell she cast her way of showcasing our magnificent friendship?" the green-eyed Black Witch asked sarcastically.

Eleonora had to replay a few seconds of the apocalyptic Trial to realise that yes, the Russian psychopath had gone first for the lethal option...and only then been roasted by lightning in retaliation.

"Forgive us, but the way you handled her in the First Task, we thought you could do the same thing again." Eleonora grimaced inwardly as Henri's tirade saw him receive a dark glance.

"Romanov is arrogant, not stupid. And unless she is also a pain-addict, she sure as Hell isn't going to give me the time to cast an elemental war-spell as powerful as the one I hurt her with. Plus of course the lightning-immunity of her Animagus form must have soared after what I did to her. And last but not least, we don't know if next time, the infrastructure inside the Coliseum will allow for something very destructive to be cast. The Water Trial was the perfect environment. It is difficult to believe the next environment will be as...advantageous as the last one."

This was exactly the kind of remark that convinced Eleonora that it was vital this teenage witch didn't join the ranks of the Exchequer. Because if Death did, in less than a decade, they would have something so dangerous as an enemy that Fate would be unable to turn bad odds into victory.

"This is why your insistence on limiting our strength to try to avoid triggering the Seal is sound in theory, but terrible in practise. It may sound weird when I say it, but I want to live to see the end of this Tournament, not die a martyr to save the world."

"The Seals may bring the end of the world as we know it," Neville Longbottom said.

"It will change the world, certainly. End it? No. And as long as the damage can be reversed, I am not going to risk my life, not when the people who have the best knowledge of what the Avatar of Darkness is capable of aren't willing to move. My life, the life of my friends, and then the rest of the world. That is my order of priorities."

The worst part was that those definitely sounded more coherent than the ones supported by the grand alliance of the Trinity, the Army of Light, and the Order of the Phoenix...

"To properly answer your first question, I will truly tell the Exchequer to go die on the next battlefield when I have the assurance the Light can be a reliable ally. Otherwise, I am going to continue getting stronger. The Tournament isn't going to be won by being lazy."

**Author's note**: The games for the Second Task have begun. Twenty-six days left until the Champions enter again the arena. Do you hear the clock ticking in the distance?

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