**Chapter 77**

**Black Meetings**

**21 May 1994, Gringotts Bank, London, England**

The new meeting organised by the Regent of House Black was very different from the day Lady Cassiopeia had invited them to Black Cobra Manor.

To begin with, it wasn’t taking place in a Black-owned house or on Black lands. Whether this was due to certain parties not trusting the others to not try assassinations or sabotage, or everyone agreeing it was better for this meeting to take place on neutral ground depended on your perspective.

There were fewer participants too. Obviously, several people had died in the last two years, like a few Burkes and other distant Black cousins, with Lord Sirius Black adding himself to this list very recently. Astrid was still studying at Durmstrang, and clearly had not envisaged missing a day of school to be included in this reunion. And then there were the adults and the children who had not been invited. Professor Severus Snape, who had certainly played the part of Dumbledore’s spy during Lady Cassiopeia’s ‘party’, had not come today, and no Hogwarts teacher had replaced him. The Boy-Who-Lived, Percy Weasley, and the non-adult Burkes weren’t there either.

As a consequence of all these absences, deliberate or not, the vast meeting hall Gringotts had placed at the disposal of House Black – for a very large gold pile, of course – was near-empty. Three adults and three teenagers weren’t enough to fill dozens of seats.

When a bell rang in the distance – probably to announce no one else would come – Bellatrix Black-Lestrange stood from her green-illuminated chair and activated a black orb which was definitely not an object created for the study of Divination.

“This will ensure the contents of our conversation do not filter outside this room,” the Dark Witch explained calmly as a sensation of cold and shadows engulfed the room. It had an effect both mysterious and slightly invigorating. Weird. “Please do not try to fight against it, the effects can be quite...unpleasant.”

“This is outrageous!” Leo Black immediately barked. “Those artefacts were forbidden by the Wizengamot centuries ago! This is Dark Magic!”

“Yes, obviously,” Regulus Black didn’t even raise his voice, but his words had some hidden steel in them, and Leo fell silent as his fragile-looking uncle spoke. “They were forbidden over four centuries ago, I believe. And I’m not exactly happy about using one today. Alas, some precautions are necessary to avoid someone going straight to a certain Headmaster and repeating every word of this conversation.”

If glares could kill, the withering expression Leo Black showed against Regulus Black would have murdered him on the spot. But there was no sentence uttered to deny the accusation in the seconds after.

Receiving no answer, Regulus Black turned his attention towards her.

“Before we address the order of the day, I believe you have a complaint to make, Heiress Potter?”

“I do, Regent Black.” Leo Black threw her a spiteful look, and the Basilisk-Slayer superbly ignored him. “During the last weeks, your Heir and nephew has spread malicious rumours and unproved accusations against my person both inside Hogwarts’ walls and outside of it. Each time, I asked him where his evidence for the hypothetical crimes I am supposedly guilty of is, and why he hasn’t raised the issue with the DMLE or the Wizengamot. Each time, Heir Black refused to prove his ridiculous assertions or retract them and apologise.”

Alexandra pushed the letter Lady Zabini had helped her prepare in the direction of Sirius Black’s brother.

“I am not willing to let this disrespectful behaviour continue any longer.” Alexandra said slowly. “I want apologies from Heir Black, and I want one hundred thousand Galleons from House Black as monetary compensation. Otherwise the next time Heir Black opens his mouth, I will sue him in front of the Wizengamot.”

Left unsaid was that the sums the Zabini employees would sue Sirius’ son and his House for would not be limited to one hundred thousand Galleons. And if the Gryffindor boy persisted, there would be grounds for a Blood Feud between their respective Houses.

Of the many things Alexandra had expected, Bellatrix Black-Lestrange cackling wasn’t among them.

“Well done, girl,” the Dark Witch complimented her before addressing her cousin. “Is everything in order, Regulus?”

“Yes, it is,” the Regent of House Black replied five seconds later, as he finished reading the letter. “My dear nephew was so confrontational there are plenty of very important witnesses to testify he truly made the ridiculous accusations Heiress Potter spoke about.”

“There is nothing ridiculous about them! She’s the Champion of Death! She’s a Black Mage!”

Only Draco Malfoy on her right jumped in his chair and suddenly watched Alexandra like she was a demon in witch’s clothing. On the other side of the table, neither Narcissa Malfoy nor Regulus Black showed looks or expressions of surprise.

“For something that was supposed to be kept a secret, there are really a lot of people aware of it,” the Ravenclaw teenager commented coldly. “And for someone qualified to participate in the European Magical Tournament, you should be more prudent, Heir Black. There will be five other ‘Black Mages’ next year, and they are not as nice as I am.”

“This is-“

“Be quiet, *cousin*.” The blue eyes of Narcissa Malfoy were not shining with motherhood and generosity right now. “Heiress Alexandra Potter is absolutely correct. If you continue on this path, a Champion will slit your throat the moment you enter the competition.”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

“How cute,” Bellatrix Black-Lestrange licked her lips and adjusted her stance. It gave her a predatory aura which made both boys on her side of the table gulp. “If I didn’t know better, I would swear I am in front of a child copy of Sirius.”

Leo, completely missing the point, preened with pride and satisfaction.

“This gives me the urge to test the Cruciatus on you. It would be a warm-up before the real session of torture, of course.” The dark aura swelled, and Alexandra acknowledged all the accusations that mentioned Bellatrix Lestrange was a minor Dark Lady were nicely grounded in reality. “I created the ritual which killed your father, boy, but I wasn’t able to see the results of my actions. Seeing you slowly die on my instruments is a really tantalising prospect and would compensate my sadness for missing his long and painful demise, I will admit.”

“YOU!”

Leo jumped and drew his wand from his pocket. The moment magic began to course and an incantation began to be muttered however, he was slammed against the wall behind them.

“When we said this room was neutral ground and that offensive magic was prohibited, nephew,” Regulus Black said in a voice where consternation reigned just as Draco Malfoy laughed loudly, “we meant it. I hope for your sake you’re listening to the instructions of your Professors better than you obey ours.”

After a few seconds, the invisible grip having neutralised the Black Heir went down, and Leo Black was able to return to his chair.

“You killed my father. The moment I become Lord Black, you will be expelled from the House and I will reveal all your crimes to the DMLE and the Wizengamot.”

“You will need evidence for that, *cousin*,” Narcissa Malfoy reminded the Gryffindor. “And obviously, you need to reach adulthood to expel anyone from the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.”

“I will tell Professor Dumbledore you threatened me,” the voice of Leo Black was trembling, though whether it was pure rage or fear was unknown.

“Who’s speaking of threatening you?” Bellatrix yawned in an exaggerated manner. “Judging by the Potter Heiress’ words, you aren’t able to open your mouth without offending ten wizards and witches. If you continue on this path, *boy*, you will be dead before December. You can swear yourself to Dumbledore or any Light Lord you want, they won’t be able to save you from the fruits of your stupidity.”

The Dark Witch wasn’t kidding on this one. The Champions and the other students qualified with them had a lot of privileges and law exemptions granted to them, and they were forbidden to kill each other outside of the different events of the Tournament. But it wouldn’t save Leo Black if he decided to insult someone like Lyudmila Romanov.

“Half of the one hundred thousand Galleons asked by House Potter will come from your trust vault,” Regulus Black delivered the final strike. “And you will apologise, *now*.”

The next forty-five seconds were the scene of one of the most insincere apologies Alexandra had ever been witness to, with Leo Black looking like he was both going to vomit and draw his wand to attempt a lethal spell any time.

“Good. We will work upon a written apology for the *Daily Prophet* next week.” This time, the Gryffindor truly looked ill. “Now let’s speak of the properties and gifts Lady Cassiopeia Black left for you. Obviously, another session with the goblins will be necessary in July to confirm it.”

Draco Malfoy was the first beneficiary to be mentioned, and the blonde-haired Slytherin received a large library of some five hundred books, around two hundred thousand Galleons, and several extensive properties in England and Scotland. Overall, the son Narcissa Malfoy looked really satisfied, and his smile got wider as the ‘gifts’ of the deceased Dark Witch for Leo Black were listed.

Was it possible for the Gryffindor to become angrier? Alexandra didn’t think so. The fact the Black Heir received three Knuts, several books of old tales for children and an impressive list of fanciful – and useless – toys said a lot about Lady Cassiopeia’s relationship with the man who had been the Lord of House Black.

Then it was her turn.

“One million Galleons and the Black Files?”

Alexandra had underestimated Cassiopeia Black, it seemed. She didn’t think the woman had so much gold left in her vaults given the state of Black Cobra Manor.

“One million Galleons and the Black Files,” confirmed the blonde-haired Malfoy Lady. “But if you don’t want them...”

“No, I will graciously accept those third year’s presents,” Alexandra replied in a hurry. “Besides, I’ve always wanted to know the dirty laundry of one Albus Dumbledore.”

And while Bellatrix Black-Lestrange snorted and most people around the table followed suit, the horrified expression of Leo Black was really priceless.

**24 May 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The theoretical exam of Ancient Runes had been really easy. Too easy, in hindsight. As long you hadn’t missed a single class and listened to Professor Babbling’s discourses on the subtleties of Elder Futhark, there was really no reason you couldn’t achieve an ‘O’.

The difficulty of the practical exam had been raised in consequence, however. First, the practical was done individually, alone in front of the Runes’ teacher. Secondly, there was a lot of multi-tasking involved.

“The fourth Rune of Elder Futhark?”

“Ansuz.”

“Correct. Carve Isaz on your exam tablet and complete in a Galdr which will limit the feet movement of an enemy duellist in proximity of it.”

Even after having spent hundreds of hours this year studying Runes it was no easy task. Thinking fast, Alexandra carved Izaz, followed by the runes of Haglaz, Berkanan and Laukaz. This was a much stronger water-themed Galdr than she was truly comfortable for battle-conditions, but it would do the job.

“Good,” the old Professor said when she presented her work. “As your last task, use your knowledge of Elder Futhark to conjure a shield which will not use the Runes of Eihwaz and Elhaz.”

Alexandra suddenly had a doubt if everything she had been asked until now was truly third-year material. Galdr – the Runic sentences of Futhark which could be used in different variants of Germanic scripts – had been the subject of many, many classes, but Eihwaz and Elhaz as shields were something that fell under the category of runic evocation, and substituting other things to these key glyphs was certainly above that in difficulty.

A good thing that all Ravenclaws loved to read ahead of the current course they were taking.

“Gift of the Aurora, Need of the Innocent, Day of Dreaming, Fire of the Home; Gebo, Naudiz, Dagaz, Kenaz, feed this fire, shape it, shield me! GENDAK!”

Flames were summoned and answered, and in a couple of seconds, Alexandra was shielded by an integral shield of fire. But by the ravens of a certain Goddess, it was wasteful in terms of energy! Nothing in common with the conservative Protego or the other basic shields Alexandra knew.

As it was, Alexandra only held the Runic-based shield for something like thirty seconds before cancelling it with the evocation of Laukaz.

This was definitely not something the Potter Heiress would use in battle-conditions if there was a wand in her hand and other options available.

“Very good,” Professor Babbling congratulated her. “Two of the students who were given this instruction for the pre-OWLs revisions didn’t manage it.”

Well, it seemed her idea that this had been above third-year material was absolutely correct.

“Full marks, Miss Potter. I’ve not been able to give a glance to your theory, but if it is as good as your performance here, an ‘O’ is a certainty.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

The older specialist of Ancient Runes chuckled.

“Thank me by integrating some of your Ancient Runes’ discoveries in the different tasks of the European Magical Tournament. You are truly gifted in the art of Runes, the numerous creations you presented with Miss Bones and Miss Greengrass are evidence enough of it. It would be a pity to neglect Galdr and glyphs while you’ve only begun to explore it.”

Alexandra nodded prudently. Of course, since the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina had specifically demanded to the other Headmasters and Headmistress that Runes were to be included in the preliminaries, it was guaranteed Ancient Runes were going to have their importance sooner or later in the Tournament.

“How far are you in your Hieroglyphs’ studies?”

“I think I am able to channel and evocate about seventy percent of the known Egyptian glyphs, Professor.”

Said like that it didn’t sound like much, but while Elder Futhark had twenty-four major Runes and Oghams had twenty-five, the runic language of ancient Keter had a couple of thousands, and while Alexandra had spent a lot of spare time studying these glyphs, she still needed to sleep several hours every night and study something which wasn’t Ancient Runes, otherwise insanity was going to burn out her brain.

“In that case...” the elderly eyes of the teacher narrowed significantly. “I would advise you to continue your hieroglyphs’ studies at a slow pace for the next two years, and to learn the basics of a fourth runic language in order to diversify your repertoire of Runes before the Tournament begins. Yes, I know this is a lot of work, but Oghams and Elder Futhark are really often studied together, and versatility is often the key in international competitions.”

A very large part of Alexandra was tempted to cry at the additional load of coursework that declaration represented.

“What would be the best runic language in your opinion, Professor?”

There were hundreds of existing runic languages – many had been entirely erased from non-magical memories – and there was no way she was going to spend dozens of hours making a list of the advantages and the drawbacks of each one.

“The Aztec Sun Runes are somewhat unconventional and unpopular, but have a lot of interesting combinations I think for someone of your potential.”

“I think Professor Sprout mentioned them once,” Alexandra tried to remember the exact moment it had been said, but it had been too long and before the benefits of Animagus transformation boosted her memory. “Don’t they require a solid knowledge of Astronomy?”

“They do,” confirmed Professor Babbling. “Other possibilities are the Sumerian Earth Runes, and Archaic Fire Tang.”

“Those are...powerful runic languages.” Powerful, and some might say, often accused from being borderline Dark by their detractors. The Sumerian Earth Runes generally escaped the attention of the Light bigots, but any language having participated in some particularly spectacular acts of Necromancy wasn’t truly ‘Light’. As for the two others, the Potter didn’t know much, but she had a feeling they would not be approved of by Dumbledore.

“I do not recommend learning a fourth runic language to every student I have in my class, Miss Potter.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Alexandra returned most of her carving daggers and other Runic possessions to her school bag. “I promise I will borrow the introduction books from the Library before leaving for the summer holidays.”

**28 May 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

There were many things one could say about Cedric Diggory. He was a Prefect. The older boy was the Hufflepuff Champion for the European Magical Tournament. As far many girls were concerned – and to a certain Asian-looking witch of Ravenclaw – he was seen as the ideal boyfriend.

There was no denying Cedric was really popular. Unfortunately for Alexandra, the foundation of this fame had begun with his selection in the Quidditch team of Hufflepuff. And despite not having the traits the professionals searched for in the recruit pools of wizards and witches, Cedric Diggory was a formidable Seeker.

And the Ravenclaw Seeker, by circumstances which had nothing to do with chance, was her for this fine afternoon, and she had huge difficulties staying in the game.

“Cho will owe me a lot of favours after this,” the Basilisk-Slayer grunted as she avoided the Bludger sent by one of the Hufflepuff beaters. The moment the titular Seeker of the Ravenclaw team had chosen to announce she was ill was heavily suspicious, and when you added the fact that Cedric and Cho were in a relationship, well...Alexandra wasn’t a Quidditch fanatic, but she could add two and two.

“DAVIES SCORES!” Lee Jordan announced.

The crowd of Ravenclaw-supporting students roared and cheered – about a third of the stadium, give or take – and several Hufflepuff players abandoned the part of the pitch she was flying over, giving her a few seconds of rest.

There was still no sign of the Golden Snitch, however.

Cedric Diggory soared once again over the stands where a lot of Slytherin students watched the game, and Alexandra pushed her Nimbus 2000 to catch up with him. As Roger had informed her beforehand, the Gryffindor’s victory earlier this morning meant Ravenclaw had to catch the Snitch or mark fifteen goals to make sure the Cup couldn’t escape them.

And to make sure this objective was not sabotaged by the Badgers, the simplest solution was to make sure Cedric Diggory didn’t catch the Snitch.

Something which was definitely easier said than done, of course.

To begin with, Cedric’s broom was a Nimbus 2000 like hers, so they were evenly matched where the equipment was compared.

But the game was occurring during a very windy afternoon, and while it was far, far from the stormy conditions of the Ravenclaw-Gryffindor game, these were weather conditions where the Hufflepuff Seeker held the advantage.

“You aren’t going to catch the Snitch like that, Potter!”

“I’m sorry, I only listen to the opinion of a single Badger, and you aren’t red-haired, Diggory!” Alexandra replied to the traditional Seeker taunt with one of her own.

All the while the black-haired teenager was trying to locate the small golden orb all Seekers wanted to catch. Where was this damn Snitch? With her improved eyes, it should be child’s play to locate it, and yet so far, there was no sign of it! By the Morrigan, was it hiding underground?

“Has someone seen the Snitch?” Alexandra asked one hour later to the six other players after Roger had asked for a time-out.

“No,” Roger answered with a large frown, and his reply was followed by five other negative words coming from the rest of the Ravenclaw team.

“Better hurry up Potter, or we’re going to be late for dinner!” Her stomach chose this moment to groan, making a lot of wizards laugh. Thirty seconds later, they all went up in the air again. As Professor Hooch brought the Quaffle back into play, Alexandra noticed Ravenclaw had one hundred and seventy points of advance, most of it due to the fact in the last twenty minutes, two of the regular Hufflepuff Chasers had been dismounted by Bludgers and their replacements were sub-standard at best.

And that’s when she saw it.

If she hadn’t changed her eyes into their hydra mode at that very moment, the Ravenclaw Animagus would have missed it like the rest of the crowd. But the Champion of the Morrigan was a Hydra Animagus, and she had seen it.

The Potter Heiress had seen the Golden Snitch be released from an enchanted box not far from the teachers’ seats. There was no wizard or witch next to it, but Alexandra understood the message coming from it just fine: ‘you will play this game for as long as I decide’. It made her heart burn in fury, and in the next seconds she had to struggle to not transform several parts of her body into her inner animal’s here and now.

The Golden Snitch was still in her sights when she had calmed herself, and the Ravenclaw Seeker didn’t waste any more time before accelerating at her broom’s full speed and diving towards the little flying ball.

The Snitch made two desperate evasions, but at the third, her hand had a solid grasp on it.

When she stopped her race mere feet above the ground, Snitch in hand, Diggory was far behind her.

The public, especially the Ravenclaw part of it, burst into cheers.

But her eyes remained for long seconds on the box in the stands which had contained the Snitch...until it was vanished, still with no culprit in sight. Alas, as many Professors and teachers had their wands in their hands nearby, even a serious investigation was not sure to give a name.

Not that one was necessary. Golden Snitches like the one she held were extremely difficult to capture and release without leaving fingerprints or spell damage on it.

“I hope the Malfoys are going to bankrupt you, old fool.”

For the time being, letting him watch as Alexandra and the Ravenclaw team claimed their third House Cup in a row would have to suffice.

For now.

**28 May 1994, Paris, France**

One of the many advantages of Paris was the ability of wizards and witches to speak without the risk of being heard by inimical parties. As long as you knew to dress like a non-magical gentleman, it was incredibly easy to lose any potential spies and unfriendly sycophants in the great avenues. The fact that everyone knew that but that three pairs of eyes that had been on him when he left the hotel owned by his parents was therefore a sign all was well within the Light, as Henri informed Eleonora da Riva walking next to him.

“Maybe they’re really afraid some assassins are going to go after us,” the words were light, and it was evident the Champion of Vesta didn’t believe a single word of it.

“That or Romanov is going to Apparate out of nowhere to challenge us to a duel.” Henri replied darkly.

“Ah, yes. Her Chaotic Majesty.” The Italian witch’s expression became emotionless very quickly. “If I had been in charge of the Army of Light’s operations, I would have immediately forgotten Hogwarts. Who cares about Death when this psychopath addicted to Chaos is the greatest threat?”

This was, admittedly, a very good point. There were just a few problems with it, of course. To begin with...

“I agree with you in principle. The problem, based on the reports my parents gave me access to, is that the Knights of the Army of Light may not have anyone powerful enough to go after the defences of the Romanov castles.” Going after the Dark Queen at Durmstrang wasn’t even an option; only Grindelwald in the last four centuries had been insane and powerful enough to challenge the defences of the Scandinavian school and the thousand-plus wizards and witches it welcomed every year. “They don’t want to admit it, but I think the Exchequer destroyed over two-thirds of their elite forces in a series of battles on Chinese soil five or six years ago. And since they have cut down on training and quality to refill the losses as fast as possible...”

“You arrive to a situation where the Champion of Death is able to kill them in droves despite being inexperienced and underage,” Eleonora finished.

“Yes and no,” Henri de Condé said. “I think it made it easier for the Morrigan’s Champion to get out of those battles alive, but Alexandra Potter is still a powerhouse. Several of our newspapers published interesting articles on the Hogwarts’ preliminaries, and even assuming she didn’t keep a lot of her skills hidden for the main Tournament, Death’s Herald was able to handily beat students two or three years older than her. She will be easily the most dangerous of the Hogwarts Champions next September.”

The female Champion nodded thoughtfully before opening her mouth again.

“Yes.” Eleonora sighed. “Incidentally, do you know if Delacour and Potter fought each other again? I know Lorenzo had an opportunity to watch her from afar, but I don’t know the exact circumstances of what happened on Beltane.”

“According to the most realistic rumours, Potter went to deliver a warning to the new Champion of Fate on behalf of her Power. She left just as Delacour and Medici were arriving.” Henri smiled. “I don’t think there was any violence. Otherwise Delacour would not have walked away alive from their ‘debate’.”

“You’re not betting on the winner on the Beauxbatons preliminaries?” Eleonora teased him.

“Delacour has an overinflated ego of her skills, and while she believes herself to be a killer of Dark Wizards, she relied far too much on her inheritance of Veela and specialised Light spells. And of course, unlike most of us in the Beauxbatons preliminaries, the Minister’s daughter felt the need to show off her talents. That way, all the Champions of the Dark know what she is capable of, assuming they have bothered opening a newspaper speaking of the Tournament these last weeks.”

It was not a generous description, it was not an impartial point of view, but Henri de Condé thought it was painfully accurate.

“Honestly, there wasn’t any point finishing first or second in these trials,” the wealthy Heir of the De Condé line continued. This was why he had limited himself in the last two ‘exhibitions’, finally reaching third place. “As long as you’re among the top four scores, the main goal is accomplished.”

“And your other two fellow Champions? Do you think they hid most of their strength too?”

“I don’t think so...not for Lucas Gauthier at least.” Henri answered. “He finished second, but I’ve the feeling he gave everything he had in the duellist contests and the obstacle courses. It’s more difficult to know for Ambre de Courtois.”

“She comes from an old line, no? She should know plenty of the good old war spells the so-noble Academy doesn’t teach anymore.”

“Maybe, but she and I are hardly good friends.”

The Italian teenage witch raised a surprised eyebrow.

“You mean there’s a girl of high lineage at Beauxbatons not interested in marrying you? Truly the end of the world is at hand!”

“Very funny,” Henri told her, though Eleonora’s remark wasn’t exactly devoid of truth. The moment he had stepped a foot inside Beauxbatons, there had not been a week where several female ‘admirers’ and ‘friends’ tried to enter his circle of close allies. Fortunately, his parents had prepared him well beforehand...it had already been bad enough even with all their warnings and tutoring. “But no, Ambre is not among the girls...and I suppose the boys...interested in a courtship and a marriage contract.”

“Interesting,” the Champion of Innocence clicked her fingers, her traits tensing in intense concentration. “Maybe I can arrange something between you and Lucrezia.”

If the intention of the remark had been to make him gape in horror, it was beautifully done.

“Eleonora, while I am not sharing most of the...bigotry some of our allies believe in, I do not think sleeping with a Succubus is very wise. Especially when said Succubus also happens to be a Champion...and a Champion with her fair share of reasons to hate anything and anyone involved with the Light. Besides, we’re going to do our best to slaughter each other on the sands of your lovely arena, if I’m not greatly mistaken.”

“Yes, but you should have seen your face when I said it!”

“You’re a strange Champion of Innocence, Eleonora.”

“Because I have humour, unlike my predecessors?”

Yes, the differences started with that, and they continued well beyond this issue.

“That and the ‘traditional’ Champions who came before you would have tried to blow up your school before accepting the Champions of War and Desire as their peers.” Henri told her for the form. He knew without doubt that Archmage Ra had already tried several times to ‘remind’ the witch sworn to Vesta her role wasn’t to be supportive of Dark-aligned policies.

“Extremely short-sighted of them, if you ask me,” Eleonora avoided a bicycle which could have crashed into her before elaborating her opinion. “We have Romeo Malatesti, Champion of Ares, Lucrezia Sforza, Champion of Venus, Lorenzo de Medici, Champion of Athena, and myself, all in the four starting positions of Champions for the Scuola Regina. When you add our magical cores, no other school has so much talent and raw power in a group of four students.”

“Yes, but there is one among you four who dreams of killing the Dark Champions.” Henri was prompt to tease back.

“Come on, oh great Champion of Horus. Romeo wants to kill Lorenzo as much as Lorenzo wants to kill Romeo. At the first opportunity, one of the two is going to kill the other, and they won’t really care if they go against the Headmistress’ instructions or not.” Eleonora sighed. “But yes, I recognise unity isn’t the biggest strength of our school, especially among the Champions. Though judging by what you told me about Beauxbatons, and what we know about Hogwarts and Durmstrang, so far there haven’t been any great displays of teamwork.”

“This was likely unavoidable since every aspirant Champion wanted to obtain his or her qualification.”

“Yes,” the admission was very reluctant and long to come, “but you can’t tell me that Lyudmila Romanov is going to play nice with the three other Champions of her school. Karl Schumacher, Viktor Krum, and Pyotr Karamnov were dominated in every task by the Dark Queen of Chaos, and every newspaper confirmed the psychopath viewed them like ants beneath her boots.”

“No,” Henri approved. “On the bright side, since they really hate her, they might try to stab her in the back if she shows weakness.”

“I would have preferred a ‘*when’* instead of an ‘*if’*,” Eleonora murmured. “I don’t think even Romeo is particularly eager to go after her, and he’s the Champion of War.”

Let unsaid was that the sword of Ares had also finished first of the Scuola Regina’s preliminaries, with only Lucrezia for sole rival.

“Lyudmila Romanov is a monster.” Like most champions of Chaos, the sociopath-psychopath began her crimes where the limits of most wizards and witches ended. And no one controlled her, all the Oracles and predictions were clear on that point. The future Tsarina wasn’t an agent of the Exchequer; she was truly dedicated to Chaos and nothing but Chaos.

“Indeed. Now, what do you think about our Supreme Leader the Infallible and Peerless Archmage Ra?” The tone of his fellow Light Champion was sarcastic enough that Henri was truly happy there were no Army of Light’s witnesses around to hear it.

But in a way, it was the very possibility of this question being asked which had led to this walk in the streets of Paris...

“I think my parents have already decreased their financial support of the Trinity by more than eighty percent. They really didn’t like being told the Trinity, the Army of Light, and the Order of the Phoenix were going to fuse, and even less to learn it as a *fait-accompli*.”

The Trinity had in the last five hundred years prided itself on trying to push more and more young wizards and witches to the side of the Light by trying non-violent methods first. Being told to merge with an entity most European Ministries were trying their best to eradicate was beyond the pale. Having to swallow the insult of considering an upstart British militia created by a man who had tried to seize all the glory of the Grindelwald War with a minimum of effort was worse.

“And I wonder if his absence which lasted centuries wasn’t the best thing that could have happened to the Trinity.”

Several elders had proclaimed being welcomed in his presence was like being in front of a living miracle. Henri’s opinion was more down-to-earth. They should have studied their Occlumency harder.

**29 May 1994, Edinburgh, Scotland**

“Evidently, the rumours an Alchemist still lived in Edinburgh were only that, rumours,” Alexandra commented as she torched down spider webs with a light – and wandless – Incendio.

“Evidently,” repeated Cho Chang, who had been staying next to the door. “This Manor looks like it’s been abandoned since the last war.”

“You have a point,” Alexandra tried to see if something interesting had been left behind, but the former owners had been very thorough. The few shelves which had been accumulating dust were empty of books, and the few objects not carried away were mostly old Daily Prophets and other papers of advertisements sent by owl-mail to someone who was no longer there. “Let’s get out of here.”

Returning outside was really a liberation. It wasn’t that the abandoned Manor was soaked in oppressive magic; the enchantments and wards protecting it were close to non-existent, and in a few years, nothing would distinguish this magical ruin from any non-magical dilapidated building.

Still, there was something wrong. Something that put the Hydra in her heart on edge.

“Has Alchemy practise...altered the environment?” The Potter Heiress asked slowly as she noticed that the former garden surrounding the Manor had a surprisingly large number of magical plants growing unchecked, including a Venomous Tentacula, which by all rights should never have survived a Scottish winter outside a greenhouse.

“I think so,” the older girl declared before grimacing. “Especially if the Alchemist who lived here wasn’t careful enough with his experimentations.”

“He had three ward stones on his property,” that didn’t speak of neglect for proper security procedures to her.

“Yes, but unless I’m greatly mistaken, the structure of the wards was elemental in nature. Alchemy doesn’t function on that system...at least all the books I’ve read are arguing the opposite.”

“Elemental magic is powerful.”

“I didn’t say it isn’t,” the Asian-looking witch replied, “but...what is the most stable prime number for elemental spells?”

Alexandra blinked at the sudden change of subject, but answered nonetheless.

“Seven.”

This was why many of the war spells she had learned recently weren’t using seven runic evocations or seven syllables. Stability meant talismans and heirlooms of protection could easily deflect or shield their user from hostile spells. The most dangerous offensive incantations were by their very nature missing a certain number of Arithmantic components...and over a certain number of missing basics, the Ministry considered the spells ‘Dark’.

Ironically, by this stupid definition, many ‘Light’ spells were now proscribed in Britain.

“The fundamental prime number of Alchemy is three. Three for the body, the mind, and the soul.”

“Explaining why the Ministry keeps such an inquisitive eye over all the Alchemists of the Isles,” not that there were many of them left, with the elective being not offered at Hogwarts or anywhere else in the last decade. “And why so many pseudo-Alchemists never achieved anything in their lives.”

“Yes,” Cho confirmed. “I suppose that theoretically, there are seven elements by the standards of what some Light idiots name the ‘Arthurian System’: Fire, Water, Earth, Air, Lightning, Light, and Dark.”

“Arthurian System, that’s a good one,” Alexandra chuckled. “The man was a Squib...”

“Compared to the stupidity of what other European wizards did, it is almost tame for them,” the other Ravenclaw said, her lips twitching. “And in a way, they’re right: the elemental magic is involved, because our body is composed in great majority of water, our emotions are a magical fire which only vanishes at our death, and so on. But the purification, the maturation, and the perfection of body, mind, and soul goes far beyond that. It creates new components and crystals, allows wizardkind to create wonderful architecture and enclaves, and spread magic where there would be nothing.”

“In a way, isn’t Alchemy an attempt by ordinary wizards and witches to develop into a proper discipline what the Powers can grant to their Champions?”

Cho Chang smiled.

“Of course you would notice that. Yes, there were legends it was a Champion of the Celestial Empire which imagined the basics of the art to give his students some measure of what he was capable of. Unfortunately, so much knowledge has been lost that trying to guess the truth and how these experiments were made is problematic at best.”

Alexandra looked at the white clouds over her head, deciding to not point out to her potential replacement for the Tournament she heavily suspected there were several organisations which had been around for the last millennia, and were certainly able to save some lore.

“This should be interesting to experiment on next year.”

“Once we’re past October,” Cho amended. “Before Halloween, we will study at Hogwarts...or should I say *I* will still have to attend all my classes.”

Alexandra rolled her shoulders.

“I will still attend the classes I feel are useful, don’t worry,” the Ravenclaw Champion informed the older witch. “There’s so much to learn about Arithmancy and Runes that one year is only testing the waters. I mastered a few glyphs and equations, now I have to really learn the secrets and the ancient useful combinations of past Masters. Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology...all of those, I will continue to attend.”

“And the rest?”

“Assuming Professor Slughorn is a competent teacher, I will continue attending his lessons, not those of Snape and Whitehead. DADA will depend entirely on the ‘Professor’ Dumbledore will introduce next September. I may continue Astronomy in elective mode...and History is going to be cancelled for an indefinite period.”

While the scores of their final exams for this year hadn’t been communicated, Alexandra was sure History had been her worst grade.

“History is important in avoiding the mistakes of the past.”

“I completely agree. But in that case, why are we spending all our classes on Goblin Rebellions and Giant Wars when thousands of wizards and witches treat those two races as nothing more than cruel and stupid beasts?”

**3 June 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

The swimming pool of Zabini Manor was becoming more and more tempting these days, as the temperatures rose and the cold rains of Scotland were becoming a bad memory. Its waters were also perfect for a young golden dragon to drink from, since the contents of the pool was devoid of all the substances the non-magical cultures put in their baths these days.

Of course, that also meant Alexandra had to levitate Fingolfin out when her Britannian Gold lost his balance and took an involuntary plunge into the azure liquid.

It seemed that for all its strengths, the ancient species of dragon had a notable weakness: they didn’t know how to swim instinctively.

“Wet,” groaned the small dragon, though he was becoming larger and larger, to the point even the act of carrying him a short distance required a partial Animagus transformation. “Wet, cold!”

“That will teach you to get too close from the swimming pool, little thunder,” Alexandra replied while trying not to laugh. “Now be quiet or no Warming Charms for you!”

Fingolfin stopped pleading, though his brilliant eyes told her the urge to speak had definitely not calmed itself...but her wand throwing inoffensive blue flames on the golden scales was too good to pass up.

“So the meeting of the Champions and the four substitutes didn’t go well,” Stella Zabini returned to the conversation a certain agitated wet dragon had interrupted.

“It was horrible,” Alexandra confirmed to her magical guardian. “Warrington was insufferable, as expected. That Junior Death Eater has yet to understand most of Slytherin House let him win the position of Slytherin Champion. And of course, now that Leo Black has shouted in every corner that I am a Black Witch, the Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs are all taking several steps back wherever I walk into a classroom. Cedric Diggory is still friendly because his girlfriend is on my side, but Geoffrey Hooper is still a scion of a Light family and it’s clear he doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

Alexandra breathed loudly, more for the theatrics than real resignation. She had not thought there was a chance to break decades of inter-House prejudices, not really.

“The best I can hope for the Tournament is a Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff alliance, and it’s really the best scenario. Realistically, all the Hogwarts’ Champions are going to compete individually and ignore each other. No one can stand Warrington; Hooper and Diggory are not friendly with each other, and my very existence horrifies those who worship the ground Dumbledore walks upon.”

There had been a slim light before the Beltane Preliminary that the Exiled and other local Hogwarts factions would be able to unite their agendas and present an image of strength to their opponents.

Obviously, it had not survived Beltane and its aftermath. Susan had not abandoned her, nor did any of the Ravenclaws – most of the House just thought Longbottom and the McLaggen cohort were just jealous of her – but all the boys and girls coming from Light families were under heavy pressure to break their bridges with her, and this included Cedric Diggory, though for the moment the Hufflepuff Prefect seemed to be resisting his father’s incendiary remarks.

“Do the ‘horrified parties’ include the Boy-Who-Lived?” asked the Black Widow.

“I don’t know,” Alexandra admitted. “Longbottom has been very distant since Beltane, and I can’t exactly have a private conversation with him. He’s never alone anymore outside of Gryffindor Tower.” After all, the Weasley Twins had only been able to have a few short exchanges with him, and they were living in the Lions’ Den! Part of it was the new status of ‘Champion of the Light’ claimed by Neville, and part of it was the fame the third-year boy had won by winning the second rank of the preliminaries for House Gryffindor.

“He could be a precious spy if handled properly.” Alexandra told the dark-skinned adult as Fingolfin began to purr under her magical ministrations. “But he is a Champion of the Light, and I still have no idea what that bitch Delacour and the Italian Champion said to him. If they managed to convince him to join their organisation of Light assassins, trying to keep him close could turn disastrous fast.”

“And as an ally, unless he makes considerable academic progresses this summer, Neville Longbottom’s value is mostly symbolic,” the Lady of Zabini Manor informed her. “His grades in Potions are truly catastrophic, though he has received excellent scores in Herbology and DADA this year, he is passable in Transfiguration and Charms.”

“One doesn’t easily catch up when the first two years have been spent playing pranks against the Slytherins,” Alexandra whispered. “And he will be at a severe disadvantage in electives next September. The Boy-Who-Lived took Divination and Care of Magical Creatures. His knowledge in Ancient Runes is nearly inexistent.”

Alexandra’s eyes crossed the irises of her guardian, and there was both satisfaction and dismay in them. It was not difficult to guess why. The Headmistress of the Scuola Regina had warned Dumbledore certain classes would be mandatory to be an effective Champion: that neither Hooper nor Warrington, Longbottom, and quite a few other substitute Champions had ever visited a class of Ancient Runes and Arithmancy was a grave mistake at best, a disguised suicide at worse.

“Perhaps Dumbledore thinks certain trials will allow them to compensate for certain weaknesses.”

“The danger represented by the Champions of the other schools is far too high to play that sort of game, in my opinion,” Alexandra swallowed as she remembered a young woman transforming into a giant lupine monster.

“I agree.”

“Hermione has overseen a study group which consulted the Tri-Wizard archives and recorded the opening trials of each Tournament. According to her, the most likely theme is a Magical Beast, and the possibilities are really down to three: we will fight something XXXXX individually, there will be one Champion per school involved in each battle, or it will be a general melee with sixteen Champions released at the same time.”

“I don’t think Sforza will support the latter,” Stella Zabini answered. “She is really amoral when she wants to be, but letting sixteen Champions fight at the same time...it has every chance to leave most of you dead in a single hour. The two other options are not impossible, however.”

And if they were participating four-by-four in the arena the Venetian-Italians had built on their lands, it translated into a one-in-four ‘chance’ to face Lyudmila Romanov. Twenty-five percent was small odds, but when one thought about the possibility of facing a Dark Lady in-being and a Fenrir Animagus in a single body, twenty-five percent was extremely high, since the Champions thrown with her had a high chance of dying in the first five minutes of participation.

“If the three other Champions unite, they may be able to take the Champion of Chaos down,” the Potter Heiress tried. It was lame, as an argument, and the Black Widow rapidly demolished it.

“You were telling me before your hopes of an alliance with the other Hogwarts Champions were dashed,” her guardian was prompt to remind her. “Hoping two other Champions, some of which may be Light fanatics who loathe you, will be willing to cooperate is pure folly. If you want to stand against Lyudmila Romanov and the other powerhouses of the Tournament, you know what you will have to do.”

Alexandra knew, yes. And while she didn’t like it, it didn’t mean her guardian’s point was invalid.

“Dark Magic.”

“Dark Magic, yes. You will have to learn Occlumency first, of course. I don’t want you to become addicted to the power of the Dark like the average Death Eater. But between becoming an Animagus, your natural talent, and my teachings, I have every confidence you will have an adequate level of Occlumency in no time.”

Alexandra caressed Fingolfin and was about to stand, when the words of her guardian told her the conversation was not over.

“As your homework, you will practise a spell outside Hogwarts until your return.”

“Wasn’t I supposed to learn Occlumency first?” The Basilisk-Slayer raised an eyebrow.

“This spell has never been known to be dangerous, either for its effects against human targets or the mental strain it gives to its users,” Stella Zabini waved away her objection. “I believe you know the wand move and the incantation.”

“Yes,” protesting she didn’t would be a lie, since Lady Zabini had been the first witch to show her the spell of the Ecclesial. “*Furorem Ecclesiam*.”

**9 June 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“HUFFLEPUFF FOREVER! HUFFLEPUFF FOR THE HOUSE CUP!”

There were many ways to begin the end-of-the-year feast in the Great Hall, and it rarely started with these words.

But today, the Headmaster had no points to give to the Gryffindors, and thus there was no change of leadership at the last minute.

Therefore the space over the students’ heads was covered in banners of Badgers, and the table on the right of the Ravenclaws was celebrating like there was no tomorrow.

“HUFFLEPUFF! HUFFLEPUFF!

A bright firework erupted in the sky representation over their heads, taking the form of the mascot of Helga’s house, and applause and cheering around Hufflepuff table rose to new heights.

“I’m really surprised we didn’t win this year,” Morag said, as girls and boys of Ravenclaw House toasted to the fact that this year, neither Slytherin nor Gryffindor had been able to claim the House Cup. “We won the Quidditch Cup...”

“Don’t look at me like that,” Alexandra replied as she toasted a golden cup in direction of Susan. “I participated in two Quidditch victories, and I certainly didn’t lose more than twenty points in nine months.”

And those few points weren’t that important, because on average, the raven-haired Ravenclaw was winning plenty of sapphire counters for their hourglass in classes like Charms.

Crookshanks purred on Hermione’s lap, and the other Exiled chose to ignore the presence of the big orange cat which had no reason to be there this evening.

“Who do you think will be the new DADA teachers next year?” Nigel asked. “We are officially opening the bets in the *Loud Duck* which will be distributed on the train tomorrow.”

“It will be a vampire,” Luna Lovegood said dreamily.

“No offense Luna,” Alexandra said while beginning to eat a voluminous plate of meat and fish, “but I don’t think our most dashing Headmaster is crazy enough to accept a vampire within this castle.”

Vampires were predators, and the few students and Professors who had the skills to become Animagi were outnumbered by those who weren’t. Inviting a vampire, even those of the less powerful sub-species, was like ringing the bell for a bloody slaughter.

“My money is more on a Light wizard, given how the Headmaster feels about me and what awaits us next year,” the Champion of the Morrigan continued. “What are the candidates proposed by the Twins?”

“Fred is betting on Alastor Moody.” Nigel spoke in a hushed tone.

“Moody? Like ‘Mad Eye’ Moody? The Auror who filled half of the Azkaban cells before the breakout?”

“Yep, that’s him. Ex-Auror, he’s retired now.”

“Nah, even Dumbledore isn’t that insane,” Morag retorted. “Look, Dumbledore was removed from his post of Chief Warlock five days ago; he’s not going to sink what’s left of his reputation on a completely paranoid maniac.”

“Not as a DADA teacher, at least,” Alexandra whimsically declared. “He might try to place him in a position for the Tournament, however.”

“That would be even worse for him politically, Alex.”

“It’s only paranoia if there aren’t people conspiring against you,” the Potter Heiress simply said before dealing with her steak. “Anyway, we will only have two months of this DADA teacher. I don’t think we will have a lot of trouble with him or her.”

“Yes, he or she will likely be gone by the time we return from the Scuola Regina,” Hermione approved. “By the way, has the mystery of the death of Sturgis Podmore been resolved?”

“No,” Morag shook her head. “The Wizengamot has been informed the investigation continues, but all evidence points out to an ‘impossible accident’. There were powerful enchantments preventing exactly that sort of thing from happening, and the easiest target in a straight line was Leo Black, not Podmore.”

“That Gryffindor was born under a lucky star,” Nigel remarked. “But with the glares he sends us, he sure doesn’t feel that way.”

“I’ve emptied his trust vault for the accusations he made against me,” Alexandra smirked. “I think he really hated me before Beltane, but now, you might say it’s really personal.”

“You should still be careful,” Hermione murmured. “He’s still the Black Heir, and while the rest of his House hates him, Dumbledore evidently has not lost all hope to bind him to his cause.”

“I know.” It was why if the opportunity existed, Leo Black was going to meet a very tragic accident during the Tournament. The accident would find Fragarach impaling his heart, or something equally tragic. Because a good enemy was a dead enemy, and Leo Black had proven he was too stupid to be anything save an enemy.

“Hey, there’s a commotion at the Gryffindor table!” Anthony Goldstein called.

“Look, Longbottom’s scar is bleeding!”

That totally stopped Alexandra’s attention from focusing on her plate.

Oh no. The scar. The last Horcrux.

By the Morrigan, what was Dumbledore thinking? Why hadn’t it been purged ritually by now?

There were some bad omens, and there was *that* sign.

“Alexandra, we should-“

“It’s too late now. Whatever is happening...we can’t stop it.”

**9 June 1994, somewhere in a dark forest of Albania**

There were some Potions which were difficult to brew and required plenty of human sacrifices for their final stages.

The one which was boiling in the black cauldron with no source of light save the fire underneath it was well beyond what competent Potion Masters specialised in Black Philtres were used to.

Seven lives had been ended at the very beginning and their vital fluids poured into the cauldron. Seven throats had been severed mere seconds ago to complete it.

Needless to say, it wasn’t exactly problem for the Legal Executioner of the British Ministry of Magic. Those unworthy lives had only been Muggles, after all.

Walden Macnair smiled as the surface of the Potion took a midnight-black colour. All was proceeding according to the plan.

It was very good, because while he didn’t know the name of the Potion his Master had ordered him to brew, the sheer rarity of the non-human ingredients and the cycles of the moon and the sun which had to be respected were making sure this combination of Potion and ritual couldn’t be prepared more than once every ten years. Failure had therefore not been an option, and not just because his Master was not forgiving with those who screwed things up by the numbers.

But he had been successful. And for this he was going to be rewarded more than in his wildest dreams.

Because he alone of the entire Inner Circle had stayed true to the cause.

More than a decade had passed, but Walden had never stopped searching for his master. Unlike Malfoy and his friends who preened on the floor of the Wizengamot, the executioner knew what he owed to the Dark Lord: everything.

Without his power, his influence, and his talent for the Dark Arts, no one would have dared challenge Albus Dumbledore and his Light fools as their rights were trampled under Mudblood shoes.

Walden had continued to search for their Lord. And over a year ago, his persistence and his will had been rewarded.

It had not been easy preparing the Potion, and many contingency plans had to be activated beforehand, as many of the immortality anchors of the Dark Lord were destroyed by unseen enemies.

But he was a Death Eater, and he was not squeamish like the so-noble ‘volunteers’ of the Order of the Phoenix. What had been done to preserve the mind and the energy of his Lord had been accomplished without reservation. Many Albanian and Balkans prisons had suffered a notable decrease in their inmates’ population.

And today the revenge he had waited so long for was resurrected.

There was no wind. There were no noises of any animal save the hisses of the numerous snakes guarding the cauldron around the clearing. There was only the soft bubbling of the cauldron’s black liquid.

And then Walden felt the wave of Dark Magic as a pale hand gripped the edge of a cauldron, followed quickly by another. And then the entire body of his Lord rose, intact, and accompanied by a rush of more powerful magic.

It was not his Master as he had been in 1981. Except the red irises, the Dark Lord was presenting a far younger and more human appearance.

But his magic and his stance proved beyond doubt that it was him.

“Master,” Walden Macnair prostrated himself, handing out the magical wand he had stolen from the Ministry archives five years ago. “Command me.”

“Rise, my loyal servant,” the voice of Lord Voldemort echoed into the night. “I am back.”

**10 June 1994, Ancient Temple of Light and Darkness, Egypt**

There were few locations Osiris couldn’t travel to freely. Pandemonium and Niflheim were two of the most prominent exceptions...in fact they were some of the only exceptions. While he was of the Dark, the Powers weren’t letting him pass unimpeded through their dimensional realms without the current Champion’s support.

Fortunately for him, there weren’t many other places aside from these thirteen miniature kingdoms outside the edge of the real world that he couldn’t access to.

Aside from that temple, that is.

The Ancient Temple of Light and Darkness.

It wasn’t the true name it had been called in the times when Keter reigned over the known world, but he wasn’t able to remember the true name.

Probably the work of his brother playing with spells shattering memories and reshaping reality without taking into account the consequences.

Osiris rarely forgot anything he didn’t want to.

“Quod Revelio!” The King of the Exchequer canted, and slowly, his magic searched for any trace of a living being inside the temple half-buried under the sands. To his surprise, the spell found none.

It was so surprising in fact he repeated the experiment twice with increasingly complex and costly spells just to be sure.

“Hmm...this is unexpected.” After so many millennia of existence, sensational events which could make him admit this were few and far between. “Last time I was able to walk into my father’s old hall, Merlin and his Knights didn’t wait a minute before trying to ambush me.”

And it was hardly the first time a Light organisation tried this tactic, honestly.

Not that Osiris could totally blame them for their straight-forward tactics: Osiris was the only wizard possessing a Dark magical core who could enter the Temple, even if his restrictions were particularly stringent.

Alone, without the support of his subordinates, the former Pharaoh – he had managed to claim the throne no less than twenty times before it bored him to death – Osiris was an easier target than when he stayed inside one of his redoubts.

But it seemed the Light sycophants following his brother and the descendants of Merlin’s supporters had finally abandoned the idea to kill him here.

In fact, the dark-shrouded Avatar of Darkness recognised as he walked deeper into the temple, they really had abandoned everything. The sand on the first levels could be excused, but it seemed most of the remaining statues and ancient Keteran decorations had been removed.

The King of the Exchequer would lie if he said he was saddened by their disappearance. The artwork had been priceless and unique, but the Dark Wizards he commanded had gathered far larger collections he could marvel at every day.

What annoyed him more was the pettiness of the gesture. Six times Osiris had been able to walk into this Temple after the Ruin of Keter and the Prophesy of Ragnarok burned its first civilisation, beginning the long, drawn-out conflict which would decide...everything.

Six times Osiris had done his best to preserve and restore some of the past splendour of this temple.

“I guess this means you are truly back, brother.” Only his sibling could have pushed for such a vulgar move, since Merlin was still his Queen’s prisoner.

The most powerful wizard in existence did not waste his time visiting every floor and every alcove. Once he had verified the Trinity – or the Army of Light, it didn’t make any difference – had transformed the religious monument into a true museum of nothingness, there was only one location he absolutely needed to visit.

The Altar of Ragnarok.

It wasn’t the name it had been first known by – like many things, it had been erased by the power of the Ruin – but it was the name Osiris had decided to call it these last couple of millennia.

Maybe he would call it something else if he was able to return it an eighth time.

Minor surprise, the two huge statues of his brother had been kept in a pristine state, while his had been demolished.

“Disappointing,” the ancient Keteran survivor verified the statues weren’t going to animate and try to kill him. There weren’t – not that it would have done them much good, protected as he was by the Shroud of Anubis, the Eye of Horus, and the Uraeus of Ouadjet, three of the most powerful magical defences ever conceived by mortal and Champion hands. “You are really becoming increasingly arrogant with old age, Ra.”

The Supreme Archmage of Light – notice the ego of someone who had never managed to keep a kingdom standing for ten years on his watch – had never been really what one would describe as patient, but with every explosive disintegration Osiris had achieved against him, it appeared his temper was becoming worse.

Of course, there was no answer. Osiris’ brother was nowhere near the Temple of the Light and Darkness.

Aside from the debris of his vandalised statues, the only evidence someone had come recently was on the Altar itself.

It consisted of seven Tarot cards.

“Arrogant and desperate,” Osiris corrected. He would be the first to confirm there was power in the magical art of Divination, but to play the cards here was a foolhardy move, and that was being generous. “Were your recent ‘victories’ unable to pierce your thick skull, Ra?”

This was a very rhetorical question, since all evidence pointed to a ‘yes’.

Osiris, King of Exchequer, First of the Dark Lords, Avatar of Darkness, raised a finger.

The seven Tarot cards levitated and then turned to reveal their natures.

*The Magician*

*The Devil*

*The World*

*The Wheel of Fortune*

*Death*

*The Empress*

*The Lovers*

“Interesting,” the millennia-old wizard smiled under the Shroud of Anubis. “Truly we live in interesting times. I will wait for you at the Tournament, *Supreme Archmage*.”

Twenty seconds later, Osiris was gone. But not before burning the Tarot cards and changing the faces of the statues to represent a clown’s grimace.

**Author’s note**: This is where year 3 (and the third arc) of The Odds were never in my favour ends.

*Alexandra Potter and the Wars of Future Pasts* is over.

Next arc (beginning next chapter) will be book four: *Alexandra Potter and the European Magical Tournament*. Unoriginal title, I know, but giving it another would give readers far too much spoilers.

I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

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