**Chapter 104**

**A Knight’s Quest**

**16 February 1995**

Alexandra woke up.

The Champion expected to hear the ruckus of battle.

But there was no noise.

There was just silence.

“Maybe it was just a nightmare...”

The problem with that theory, of course, was that she was totally unaware of where she was. Someone or something had brought her, in a quite comfortable bed...but Alexandra had never seen the bed or the furniture around it before. It had a Celtic vibe, with lots of magically-grown wood, and the shades of the object were pleasant to the eye, as they went from light brown to the purest dark.

But the walls were of stone, and not the sort that was built for a house or a castle. The stone was from the very mountains itself, Alexandra had only to touch it with her hand to be sure.

As she felt no pain, Alexandra decided to leave the bed. As the Ravenclaw Champion stood on shaky legs, she abandoned the white night gown someone had clothed her with...and sure enough, there was a neat difference of sin colour on her left arm. The upper part was tanned and absolutely coherent with the rest of her body...but her hand and everything the neat ‘line’ was a pale white, as if she had tried to deprive this part of her arm from sunbathing...or if it had suddenly been forced to regenerate after someone severed her hand and more.

“So it was not a nightmare...Changelina, my underwear, then my Ravenclaw uniform.”

Alexandra would not admit it but she was extremely relieved when the Venetian-made artefact obeyed her instructions and ensured her body disappeared under her Hogwarts robes. If this wasn’t a nightmare, then it meant most of what she had owned, what she had cherished, everything was-

“You are awake.”

The Potter Heiress turned...and was not surprise to see a familiar figure descending stairs carved in the very stone.

“Lady Morgane.”

With her sheer power, her simple black robe giving vibes of a High Priestess, and the scar disfiguring her face, the legendary vampiric witch could hardly be mistaken for someone else.

“Alexandra Potter. I am happy to see you have perfectly recovered. It took me and several Healers a few hours to break the curses Ra had inflicted upon your flesh. The wounds you took from the shockwaves of the Avatars’ fight were handled by your regeneration abilities, but the Archmage’s Light magic was far more difficult to remove.”

Alexandra shivered...violently.

And for the first time in many days, this shiver was one of fear.

“What...what a terrifying monster.”

Most of the attacks she had tried to parry or deflect had been so beyond her it was utterly ridiculous. The difference of potential and experience...it might as well be the distance between the Sun and the Earth.

The Queen of the Exchequer slightly inclined her head.

“The Archmage of the Light is many things we abhor: a fanatic who will destroy every piece of Dark magic if given the opportunity; an oath-breaker, a megalomaniac killer of children and innocent souls. But one thing that we have never accused him of is to be magically weak.”

And for good, reason.

All the Dark Champions that could be mustered had fought him together, and Alexandra was honest enough to admit that if the King of the Exchequer had not arrived when he did, they would all have perished accomplishing exactly nothing.

“I feel...stupid.” Alexandra admitted. “I thought...I thought...I thought that now that Nidhögg had told me how to bypass the White Phoenix’s eternal flame, I could beat him. I was just...arrogant. And by my fault, two Champions died.”

None of the two had been what she would call friends, but they had answered her call...and they had died for a fight there was no possible way to win.

“They chose to stand by your side.”

“Yes, but-“

“Do you really believe the Archmage would have spared any of you if he had the time to search for all the Dark Champions city district by city district?”

“No,” the Potter Heiress, “no, not in a thousand years.”

Morgane Rys’Ygraine Avalon nodded with a faint smile.

“I will not say you decided on a wise course of actions, for deciding to fight Ra can’t be considered wise or prudent. But I know what it is to be young and prideful. I myself tried to poison him when I was young, and I almost received the Pendragon Executioner’s axe against my neck for my arrogance.”

Poison? To kill a Phoenix Animagus? Yes, it was...err...not clever at all. Alexandra was about to ask how in the hell she had survived this problem, for Ra would not have left a Dark Witch live if it was in his power, but the Queen of the Exchequer continued to speak.

“I could hardly be present, as both the Grail and Excalibur are artefacts that cause me agonising pain by their mere presence,” Morgane revealed, “but I watched your fight first by water scrying and then reviewed it by Pensieve. The execution was good. Using a modified Runic Curse of the Great Devourer was the best choice you had to put an end to this fight, as a long duel would have given the victory to Ra in all possible scenarios. Congratulations by the way, dear: you are one of the rare souls in this world to have managed to draw blood from the Archmage, and survived to tell the tale.”

“I don’t feel very...honoured. I feel...humiliated. If the Avatar of the Dark...if Osiris had not arrived, we would all be dead.”

“True, though I think you still underestimate how dangerous Ra is. Of the current members of the Exchequer, there are only five that have survived a duel with Ra, and the King is included in that number.”

“You were too.” Alexandra didn’t bother pretending it was a question. She had wondered at one point how Morgane could have been wounded by her half-brother when Arthur wasn’t a real wizard. The answer to that question was all too evident now.

The legendary witch gave him a sad smile.

“I was going to die horribly after less than a minute of fight when the King arrived and saved me.” Alexandra gaped. “Oh yes, that’s one more thing we have in common...although I will note I was twenty years older than you are when this fateful duel happened to me.”

And yet Morgane had been beaten as easily as she was...Alexandra shivered again. What an idiot she had been to think she could beat that sort of monster...

“But if he can’t be beaten, no matter how weak the Light is...that means the Grail....the Grail destroyed Venice, didn’t it?”

“No, the Grail has not detonated.”

“It’s...” the word ‘impossible’ was on her tongue, but with everything that happened... “How can it be so?”

“While this battle was the result of errors, miscommunication and other issues...our organisation has always believed in preparing many contingencies. As such, there is still time to prevent disaster. Days, in fact. I didn’t know how many days would be required to heal your wounds, so you were led to this island, where the ravages of Time can be temporarily slowed down. You will stay here for six days. For the world outside, it will have lasted six minutes.”

The vampiric witch turned around, and a small gesture of her moon-shaped staff was the only suggestion there was to follow.

There were many stairs of stone, and as long as they had climbed four or five, the colours changed.

The temperature was pleasant, but the higher they got, the best Alexandra’s senses could perceive the familiar odour of the sea.

The wind began to be felt on her skin...but where she had expected the natural light of the sun, there was something that looked very much like twilight...no, surely they couldn’t have-

The Queen led her out through a large stone gate that was big enough to let an adult Green Welsh dragon go through effortlessly...and they arrived in what felt was like a mountain pasture.

It was a mountain pasture calmly waiting for her...under a dark sun.

No, no it wasn’t that...it had to be an eclipse, right?

It had to be-

Alexandra blinked and saw numerous Hippogriffs flying in the distance. And what she had believed to be a strange pile of rocks suddenly rumbled before smoking...oh right, it was a Red Welsh Dragon...

Alexandra changed her eyes into those of her inner animal, and in a few seconds, she could acknowledge this was something repeated as far as her eyes could observe. There were countless magical species living here, both small and gigantic. There were strange squirrels with multiple tails. There were a few enormous slugs and snails. There were dozens of species she had never seen once in her life...

The island itself, bathed by the weak light of this strange eclipse, was quite large. There were three tall peaks, and though none of them were supporting the comparison with the Alps north of the Scuola Regina, they had the merit to exist...and at their base, there was a large forest that felt like it had stood for millennia.

And everything was soaked in magic. Ancient magic, natural magic, call it what you wanted: magic was everywhere: in the water, in the air, and in every living creature that breathed and moved.

This wasn’t a continent, but this was not a magical manor and associated park either. This was a full-blown magical preserve...and one clearly that the Exchequer had not bothered informing any Ministry about the existence of.

“How did you hide it?” the young green-eyed witch asked curiously. “The Statute didn’t forbid you from hiding whole islands but-“

“Oh, we hid it long before the Statute was a mere idea in the Archmage’s mind.” This time the vampiric Queen looked incredibly satisfied, for some reason. “Welcome to Avalon, Champion Alexandra Potter.”

**16 February 1995, outer edge of the Venetian lagoon**

“By the putrescent smell of a thousand ghouls!”

Gilderoy had known the problem was massive. He was hardly the first member of the Dark Force Defence League to Apparate near the old city of Venice, and if you could count on something, it was for rumours to spread faster than magic.

And yes, magic allowed news to spread incredibly fast. The former Hogwarts teacher was well aware of that. Much like he entertained zero doubt about the utility of the Dark Force Defence League. Everyone who had fought a skirmish against Dark Wizards and professed to hate ‘Dark Magic’ could get an invitation these days. That was why there were more spies than honest members...being one of said spies, the former Ravenclaw knew what he was talking about.

“There are moments when you would prefer to be surrounded by a thousand hungry werewolves...this might be one of them.” He whispered. “If this isn’t the greatest violation of the Statute of Secrecy...ever...I am ready to eat my books...”

Gilderoy didn’t even know how to begin.

The immense island supporting a colossal megalith that was levitating magically a few hundred metres above some lesser islands of Venice?

Sure, let’s begin with that. How do you convince a non-magical man or woman that it was perfectly normal? Especially when there was a small river flowing from a hole in the massive runic-carved rock? Or was he also supposed to forget the ten thousand of glyphs shining in a powerful light...so powerful they could be seen from kilometres away without any Charm help?

“The volcano is already bad enough...”

Who by the fangs of a vampire had thought it was a bad idea to create *a freaking volcano* so close to Venice? Actually, that was only the first of many deranging creations. How by the stone skulls of the mountain trolls did you create a volcano?

And yes, if you thought the flying monolith or whatever they ended up calling the river-generating rock was way too visible, you were going to love the *volcano*.

At least it was easy to understand why it had been ‘created’. The lava and the fire had carved a vast magical circle of enchanted circle around the Venetian lagoon, preventing everyone from Apparating out or in.

“But this isn’t the end, right? This is the beginning...”

There was no gentle way to say it...there was a massive black sun right above Venice.

No, it wasn’t a normal sun. No, it was not an eclipse. It should be dawn right now...the sun should be rising in the east...should, of course, because in multiple locations where there was a powerful concentration of magic in the world, there was this black sun and an endless tide of black clouds.

Hundreds, maybe thousands, of magical cities, not to mention millions of non-magical men and women, could see the Black Sun.

This at least they could have explained. Some kind of atmospheric anomaly, an extraordinary stellar phenomenon that could only happen once in ten thousand years...it was not an eclipse – you could look at it directly, unlike a true eclipse – but apart from the sensation of wrongness it emanated, it didn’t really scream ‘magic’.

“But the fact this...this thing has frozen Venice out of time...this can’t be explained or solved.”

If someone had told Gilderoy something like this was possible twenty-four hours ago, he would have laughed to this someone’s face.

Magic was capable of extraordinary deeds, and in rare occasions – generally after massive wars that saw magic distort everything in a war zone – it had been noted that in several locations, time was flowing faster or slower than it should be.

But those were the results of catastrophes and disasters.

Never had any Warlock ever proclaimed in front of his or her peers that he had managed to alter the power of *Time*.

The problem was that, given what he was seeing, Gilderoy could clearly tell that nobody had ever boasted about it...but quite evidently *someone* had achieved it.

And the American spy had a good idea *who* was responsible for this feat.

Unfortunately, having suspicions was useless.

“Well, this is not something you see every day!”

Gilderoy felt his mouth open in surprise as robes of an extremely ugly red shade entered his vision. He closed it fast. What was this...calamity doing here?

“The Butcher of Dresden...” the British-born wizard growled.

“That’s not very polite,” the awful-looking ‘wizzard’ said as he agitated his long red decrepit hat in a ridiculous manner. “I have a name...and you and I share many things...we were teachers at Hogwarts School Witchcraft and Wizardry! We were in fact teachers of the very same class!”

“Yes, we were...and I believe Dumbledore must have been raving mad to invite you here!”

“Not mad, just desperate...the poor man had no serious candidate applying for the position!” Well, that at least sounded like the truth...

“Why are you here, *Butcher*?”

“Rincewind! That’s my name, not Butcher...*Professor* Lockhart. And as for why I am here, it’s incredibly evident. I am one of the greatest experts in covering breaches of the Statute of Secrecy.”

“Excuse me? You...you *incinerated Dresden*!”

“Something which, as you may have yourself realised, didn’t result in any accusation I made mincemeat of the Statute.”

The worst part of this odious argument was that the pyromaniac was right.

“Yes. I must give you that. Does that mean the ICW would close its eyes in the case you were able to incinerate Venice?”

“Well, no...” the Butcher replied, and for the first time, a grimace appeared on his face. “When I burned Dresden, people easily forgot that I was able to get away with it because Europe was burning in the throes of war. There were thousands of strategic bombers available to take the blame; all I had to do was to make sure they targeted the same city as I did. But there’s no war in Europe...or at least until today, there weren’t any wars.”

Given how cataclysmic the repercussions of this catastrophe were going to be, the words used were well-chosen...

“And you didn’t have a city frozen in time to deal with.”

“Yes,” Rincewind continued to agitate his ridiculous hat. “I saw several wizards who are immobile in the outer zone. Don’t they look like mosquitoes trapped in a sea of jelly?”

Gilderoy Lockhart had class. He refused to answer this taunt.

“Can you ‘unfreeze’ the entire city?”

“No, I can’t. But I don’t think it is going to be that much of a problem.”

The American spy gritted his teeth...but seeing no more explanation was delivered, he forced his mouth to utter the word the pyromaniac was awaiting.

“Why?”

“Because no matter of how it is powered, such an unprecedented feat of sorcery demands phenomenal quantities of sorcery. It can’t be sustained for long. In fact, before Apparating here, I saw certain outer zones of the lagoon shiver temporarily out of the ritual effect before being seized by it again. Venice and the nearby islands will be released from this extraordinary time-freezing ritual soon. Of this I have no doubt.”

“What does it mean ‘soon’?” If it was a few hours, there may be a hope to save the Statute and everything associated with-

“Oh, a few days, I would say.”

Gilderoy cursed loudly. Yes, it was very rude...but this meant that as he feared, the world of yesterday was gone.

“This is incredibly bad.”

“Yes, but not the reason you fear.” The Butcher of Dresden gave him a look of pity. “I used several arcane spells my friends gave me in the last days. *He* is here. *He* is in the middle of the Plaza di San Marco.”

“I don’t understand-“

“They have given him many names, you know,” the red-clad wizard said whimsically, “but the one which survived to this day is *Dark Lord*. And if the legends are true, his enemy must be the *Archmage of Light*.”

“This is...difficult to believe. Why-“

“Why indeed would someone that powerful choose to cast a ritual that would trap him with thousands of other souls away in this prison of time? Why would so someone who has been alive for so long and lived for centuries in the shadows of the Statute break it in this outrageous manner?”

“And you believe you have the answers.”

The Butcher shook his head.

“I don’t believe, I know it. It’s incredibly clear, *Professor*.”

“And what is clear?”

“The mightiest Dark Lord this world has ever seen was more worried about what would happen if he didn’t freeze the city than he was of the consequences of breaking the Statute.”

This was...frightening. But there was no guarantee the Butcher’s theory was the right one...even if Gilderoy feared the other wizard was.

There was however something...

“Playing for time,” the spy murmured. “If you are right, this is nothing but the greatest magical attempt to buy time *by freezing Time itself*. But that implies there’s someone who can rush to the rescue once the city will be released from this ritual.”

“Yes,” Rincewind smiled, “I wonder who it could be?”

**16 February 1995, Avalon**

Alexandra had expected some additional explanations after these words. But the Queen of the Exchequer had not seemed in the mood to provide any...and had returned inside the caverns for now, leaving her in the middle of the magical preserve.

No, she had left the green-eyed girl in the middle of *Avalon*.

“And here I thought a few years ago that Hogwarts was the most magical location I would ever see...”

Alexandra left the stone path and began to walk northwards, across the pasture...and urgently took a few steps back as some sort of aggressive large-beaked bird charged her to defend its nest.

“Sorry!” Apparently there were a lot of nests here, and the birds were really territorial. “Sorry!”

It was only when she was back on the stone path that the red-black bird stopped considering her as a threat, though.

Someone giggled behind her head.

“You’ve been forced to withdraw by an Alch Llwch Gwin.”

“Well, I am a guest here...Lucrezia. I am not going to trample the nests and terrorise them.”

Alexandra turned her head, and the Succubus was indeed here, wearing a sorceress robe that could have passed from a long distance as a school uniform...but only from afar. The crimson robe was far too scandalous to pass any serious inspection close.

“A good thing you did. If you had insisted, our local guardian would have intervened.”

Alexandra raised an eyebrow...before giving a glance to the adult red dragon seemingly asleep not far from her current position. And if someone believed the dragon had truly returned to a dreamy rest so fast, Alexandra had a lordship near the Venetian volcano to sell him or her.

“Yes, a good thing...” Alexandra chuckled as the other Champions appeared one by one. Eleonora da Riva. Romeo Malatesti. And of course, last but not least, Lyudmila Romanov.

The Champion of the Morrigan almost hoped to see Poliakov and Arali appeared. They hadn’t been friends, but they were Champions.

But no one else came. They were five Champions, four for the Dark, one for the Light...the survivors of a battle it was not within their power to win.

“Will someone tell me what is this eclipse above our heads?” Alexandra asked.

“It is not an eclipse,” Eleonora was the first to answer. “It is more a black sun acting as a focusing lens for the ritual of the Exchequer, powered by the multiple Seals which were triggered during the Tournament. Thanks to it, the Exchequer was able to freeze time over the Venetian lagoon.”

“How is it even possible?” Alexandra wondered, absolutely bewildered. Magic was capable of miraculous things, but stopping *Time*?

“The fruit of long and costly programs of research, that led to the creation of something higher authorities than I called the ‘Time-Turner’,” Lucrezia tried to not sound too smug...and majestically failed. “As I understand, the King activated seven of them last night. But the process was incredibly complicated, not to mention it took hours...and of course, when time was stopped, the battle had already taken countless lives.”

The Champion of Venus decided wisely to avoid mentioning that if it had taken a few more minutes, all of them here would have joined the fallen.

“I suppose it’s as good a reason as any why we didn’t see the Avatar of the Dark in the early stages of the battle,” though Alexandra wasn’t naive enough to believe it was the only reason. Delacour choosing Fire instead of the Light had been a bit too convenient and the Potter Heiress didn’t believe the ‘Deus Ex Machina’ moments could happen for them. Not when Fate had been for so long an agent of the other side.

“You give one of the old fossils far better intentions than I would,” the Dark Queen crossed her arms.

Alexandra felt a bit more tired than she should be, suddenly, and decided to use a large tone nearby as a seat.

“I am not naive, Lyudmila.” The green-eyed Ravenclaw looked straight in the eyes of the Champion of Chaos, an experience that was...really interesting...and unnerving. “I know *He* didn’t save us because of the goodness in his heart, or some other ridiculous motive. But *He* came to battle Ra, when no one else did. *He* saved our lives. This is not some cheap and easy deed you brush off like it didn’t exist.”

“True,” the Durmstrang witch conceded...before stubbornly returning on her ‘path’. “But since he froze himself inside of Venice, he has neutralised the other old fossil, along with the Grail and Excalibur. Assuming the city stays like this for years-“

“It won’t,” Lucrezia Sforza interrupted, inspecting her nails. “This is a question of days before time once more rules supreme on Venice. The sands of time contained in the Time-Turner are not infinite.”

This, at least, cut off the tirade of the Dark Queen. Yes, assuming this was the truth, it could not pass as a self-interested gesture. This impressive miracle of magic was revealed for what it was: a contingency unleashed because there was no other choice that was going to give time to Venice and the rest of the world.

And joys of joys, Alexandra was ready to bet that the Grail’s explosion was not imminent enough to prevent the Archmage from escaping Venice and the bloody disaster he had created with his fanatics.

Alexandra watched as several young birds and mammals ran in the distance, playing the games of youth. Given what was awaiting outside of Avalon, the young witch was blessing their innocence.

“What do you think, Alexandra?”

Funny of how everyone nearly dying at the hands of a near-invincible foe had convinced everyone to use the first names of every Champion...

“I think I got the beating of a lifetime.” The Potter Heiress grimaced. “If I had known how deep the abyss of power was between the Archmage and I, I would never have stopped running...”

“You likely survived the longest everyone of us could have,” Romeo Malatesti was pale, his usual arrogance nowhere to be seen. “Except perhaps our dear Lyudmila here...nice Chaos Summons, by the way...”

“Thank you,” the Champion of Loki bared her teeth. “Though regrettably, I don’t think I surprised him that much. Either a former Champion used it against him, or he already suspected my magical specialty, and invented spells to counter me.”

“Or he did both,” Eleonora commented neutrally, ensuring all of them grimaced at the same time. Yes, given the sheer depths of magical lore and power Ra had at his disposal, ‘both’ couldn’t be dismissed.

“Yes,” Alexandra nodded. “That said, his arrogance led him to make huge mistakes. Did you know he didn’t ward his temporary site against lightning war spells?”

“You’re not serious...he really failed to prepare that badly?”

Alexandra shrugged.

“To be honest, his wards and his protections were practically unassailable against any Dark-imbued spell.” Alexandra admitted, before snorting. “And I would be lying if it didn’t play a part in my belief I could at least give him the fight of his life. Something, obviously, I was completely wrong about.”

“But Fate has no longer a Champion, thanks to you.” Lucrezia said sweetly.

“It is still a Power of the Light, even if it has considerably been weakened.” Eleonora warned. “Judgement, Order, Innocence, Wisdom, Unity and Fate for the Light. The Dark has Death, War, Chaos, Desire, Corruption and Confusion. Now Life is Neutral, permanently bound to the Power of Fire, no matter what happens to this bitch of Delacour in the days to come.”

“But the advantage is clearer when it comes to active Champions,” the red-robed Succubus insisted, “Eleonora has been sentenced to death by the Archmage, and while there are two others, one of them is heavily wounded and missing, courtesy of Alexandra. If we-“

“No,” Alexandra was prompt to speak. “Absolutely not.”

The more this conversation continued, the more exhausted she felt.

Not physically; on that front, she was fully rested.

But mentally, the Hydra Animagus was tired.

Tired...and she had enough. There had been too many deaths last night...too much senseless butchery.

And her friends were frozen in the middle of this devastation...at least there was the hope they had been soundly asleep and no harm had befallen them...the damage had been mercifully limited to some Light holdfasts inside Venice, and the butchery in the streets had not extended to nearby houses and palaces over the canals of Venice.

“You are the Champion of Death.”

“I am Alexandra Potter.” And she didn’t bother turning her head again to face the Succubus. “I lost one arm, my wand, and my sword last night. And I say ‘enough’. Since the Exchequer is happy to keep all the answers, they can deal with Ra on their own.”

The Ravenclaw Champion abandoned her stone seat and walked away. Alexandra ignored where the Avalonian path was leading, but it was better than staying here, listening to things that were way over league and made her feel like a pawn in a game of monsters.

**16 February 1995, Rome, Italy**

Raimondo Salvatore, Minister of Magical Italy, was not angry.

No, he was not feeling deeply angry.

He was feeling enraged beyond measure. He was feeling maddeningly furious. ‘Angry’ was too weak a word to describe the combination of emotions raging inside his chest.

“Why are you here? Do you realise what you have done?”

“I am here to inform you of modifications about the Great Plan.” Angelica Sforza, headmistress of the Scuola Regina, had come dressed like she was about to go to the opera. Her blue robe was sublime, and on a normal day, Raimondo would have admired the way it espoused her body...but this was no normal day. This was a day of disaster, and this was the Succubus’ fault! “And yes, I realise perfectly what has just happened. Venice is frozen out of time, along with most participants of the Tournament.”

“Then perhaps you should have had some honour and be frozen along with the entire city!” The Minister of Magical Italy seethed. “It is tradition for a Captain to go down with his ship!”

“Venice is not a ship, and I do not rule the-“

“DO NOT TO PLAY WORDS WITH ME!” Raimondo roared, before he tried to control himself. His outburst had not provoked the slightest sign of panic from the Headmistress, and his loss of control was not going to solve everything. “The European Magical Tournament was your game. You engineered everything; you bought the necessary voices both here and among the Venetian great families. But we never intended for something like this! You assured us the Statute of Secrecy was going preserved, both for the Fourth Task and all the other festivities!”

“I lied.”

“Good, you...” Raimondo lost for a few seconds his voice. “You what?”

“I lied.” Angelica Sforza said a second time, all the while adjusting her luscious black hair. “It was always our intention to break the Statute. Arguably, doing it today was not the plan. We were planning for it to happen on the day of the Summer Solstice, at the end of the Tournament.”

“But...but...” the Minister felt as if a pit had opened to swallow his feet, a pit that was dragging him into a nightmare from which there was no escape. “But *why*? The Statute is the foundation of our society!”

“Oh, please,” it was as if a mask had been torn, and the blue-eyed Headmistress was revealing who she really was. “I hope this is just a reflex to pretend what you have defended in politics for decades. The Statute is a lie, forged in genocide by the Light, and that everyone wealthy has tried her or his best to move around behind the scenes. How do you think House Sforza got so wealthy? I can assure you we didn’t limit ourselves to the transport of magical cargos these last decades!”

This...this was...this was worse than everything he had believed into.

“But the Zabini delegate I was speaking with assured me that-“

“The Zabinis are really gifted when it comes to dazzle their clients and allies while obscuring their resources and wealth.” The Succubus declared while showing no emotion. “But the reality is that they have their fingers in every company which is involved in the diamond trade, both in the magical and the non-magical societies...and I will say, both the legal and illegal trade of it.”

“Of course,” Raimondo seethed, “of course the Zabini are members of your treacherous conspiracy too.”

“They are not.” Angelica Sforza shook her head, to his stupefaction.

“What?”

“Oh, House Zabini and House Sforza share a lot of important goals. We are in...a very profitable relationship. And the British branch proved incredibly useful. Without them, we would not have been able to keep an eye on one of the most gifted witches of the young generation...yes, chance and a good network really favoured our interests here. But no, there is no Zabini currently serving us directly. They desired to tear apart the Statute, much like we did, but they are hardly alone in that.”

“So you say. The Statute protected us from the *barbarians* of the *other* society!”

This time, he obtained an emotion on Sforza’s face. Unfortunately, that emotion was disdain.

“Minister...each nation of importance in the non-magical world is aware magic exists and that there is a society of wizards and witches hidden somewhere on their lands. Most of them have a secret intelligence organisation whose goal is to interact with magical practitioners. Well, I say most of them, but I should say ‘everyone but Russia and China’. The last time the imbeciles of Moscow spoke with the Tsar’s Court, it ended with a few hundred thousand soldiers dead and the Tsar himself crucified a lot of those ‘communists’. As for China, it has no magical society worth the name anymore, courtesy of the Light.”

“Even assuming it is not a lie, like the rest of your ‘reassurances’,” Raimondo felt he was trying to not sink into quicksand, “we had a prosperous and stable society. The limited contact could have stay...limited for centuries!”

“No. The non-magical civilisations innovate too fast; despite our best efforts, we are slowly but surely losing ground. You say there are barbarians outside? Give it a few decades or not, and if they don’t blow up the planet beforehand, the magical society will have turned *us* into the barbarians.”

“This is utterly preposterous.”

Angelica Sforza inspected her blue nails again and delivered a cold smile.

“We will have to agree we are in disagreement, then.”

“I will do nothing of the sort. You are under arrest for high treason.” Raimondo proclaimed, before activating the magical alarm that would give the go-ahead to his battle-hardened bodyguards to storm in and arrest her.

Several seconds passed.

The door didn’t open...and there was no sound of battles, no footsteps indicating his men were running to accomplish his orders.

The Minister of Magical Italy tried to draw his wand...and was disarmed the moment his finger touched the wooden hilt.

“How?”

“I told you we were prepared for this day, Minister. As I said before, it came earlier than we predicted, but we always planned that the Statute would be no more the moment the Tournament started. Your bodyguards are ours. Your political allies are ours. The only reason you were given the Minister job, ultimately, was because we needed to fool the Light spies plaguing the other political factions. Since you evidently knew nothing about our real plans, the fanatics were persuaded your political alliance was free of our influence. We thank you profusely for distracting them.”

“You used Italy for your idiotic game? You dared using me?”

A long black hand jumped into the open palm of the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina.

“You can’t kill me. You can’t...today is going to be a disaster, and no one will follow you! Murder me, and Magical Italy will disintegrate!”

“But Magical Italy isn’t going to disintegrate,” the voice arrived from behind, cultured and powerful, “for I will be here to guide all the magical souls of this beautiful nation!”

Raimondo Salvatore opened his mouth, and nothing came out.

For moving on his right to join the Succubus, there was...there was...it was him...and yet it couldn’t be, so it had to be-

“A pathetic illusion or some good Polyjuice will only give a few hours!” The Minister tried hard not to panic.

“We are above such crude methods of identity thievery. Aren’t we, Rook Imposter?”

“We are, Knight Recruiter.”

Perfect. The voice, the behaviour, and the little details...everything was perfect, how could-

“This...I...maybe I was a bit hasty. I am willing to negotiate-“

“There is nothing to negotiate for we never trusted you would be reliable enough to play your role in the New Age. Goodbye Minister. Caerulea Mors!”

Raimondo Salvatore tried to jump out of his seat. Unfortunately for him, a lifetime of politics did not give him superlative reflexes...and the pain exploding in his chest was the last thing he ever felt.

**16 February 1995, Avalon**

There was a lot to see in Avalon. The stone path had long vanished behind her, but Alexandra hadn’t been that bothered. Assuredly, it made her progression slower when the grass was high, because you had to be wary of the astounding number of magical species hidden in it. She had to change from her Ravenclaw uniform to some more practical sportswear; it was way easier to discover the island.

Once she got to the southern part of Avalon, the terrain was far rockier, and there was a profusion of reptiles and birds.

This was here the Ravenclaw Champion met the first Avalonian Hydra.

She was not a wild animal. The moment she saw her, the three-headed majestic animal pushed a ball of leather in her direction, and instantly, a small group of baby hydras slithered in her direction.

What was a Champion supposed to do? Alexandra played ball with the brown-scaled baby Hydras, with the mother keeping an eye on them in the distance.

At least this left her the time to study this species she hadn’t heard of before. All the Hydras presenting herself to her eyes had brown scales, with a few black scales that formed markings that allowed her to distinguish them from another. This species had no paws or appendages separated from the main body; the three heads were emerging from a snake body. There was no fire breath capacity either. The maws were venomous, however. The babies, all the size of a big dog, had all it, so it stood reason the mother keeping an eye on her had an even more potent venom.

Alexandra’s best guess was that this brown-scaled Hydra was a sub-species of Lesser Hydra which had been declared extinct outside of this island, and the Exchequer, for reasons that could range from the generous to the self-interested, had prevented its extinction.

Alexandra didn’t know how long she stayed here, letting her hair received the sea wind, but it had to be several hours. There was enough time for Mother Hydra to go fishing, and the babies to exhaust themselves pushing the ball with their snout in an enthusiastic miniature football game.

Once the mother returned, predictably, the babies hadn’t much interest in the ball or anything like it. There was fish to the menu; or more precisely, Mother Hydra regurgitated a sort of fish porridge that filled the gullets of her children.

Alexandra took her leave and resumed her walk.

Sometimes it was getting warmer and there was a greater amount of illumination; other times, it got darker and colder. At no point the ‘Black Sun’ over the island did show a sign of weakening. At least it was not a true eclipse, so you could look at it without enchanted glasses.

A forest appeared in her field of vision, and at the edge of it, there were several adult Ceryneian Hinds, impossible to miss with their brilliant silver skins.

Yes, the magical does ran away like they had Sauron whipping them when they saw her. Alexandra chuckled. It was good to see that some things weren’t changing, whether dark times were ahead or not.

The young witch had not accelerated her pace, thus it took her some minutes to realise that while the Hinds had run away, the Unicorns of the forest had merely decided to move by a few hundred metres while continuing to graze peacefully.

Most animals had not been a surprise. The Unicorns, on the other hand...yes, they were a massive surprise.

The Hinds were symbols of Innocence, but they were not *Light*. The Unicorns were...but then again, they were *Innocence* and *Light*. As long as Morgane and the Exchequer let them in peace, the Unicorns would return the favour.

Still, it was an impressive herd. The Forbidden Forest had some Unicorns, but here, they had to be seven or eight adult mothers, and ten foals, easily recognisable with the gold colour of youth.

Alexandra watched them for long minutes. The Unicorns returned the favour, or at least some of the guardians did, while the rest continue to eat and the foals were busy suckling their mothers from all the milk they could get.

Shaking her head, the Potter Heiress turned away and entered the forest. Quite quickly, the power of magic was such like it was like one could easily drown in magic. There were hundreds of Pixies and small fairies playing in the trees. They were so busy only a minority paid attention to her presence, and even then, for only a few seconds.

The song of magic grew more powerful. There were old enchantments there, some older than House Potter had existed.

Just as she was thinking that, the stone path reappeared, like it had always been here.

Alexandra hesitated. It was getting quite dark, and the Pixies’ lights were now behind her. If she wasn’t a Hydra Animagus, Alexandra would have already been forced to cast wandlessly a Lumos.

After a few seconds, curiosity took the better of her. The stones were quite different here; it was as if they had been carved by magic, given how large some of them were, and the moss and the sheer weight of magic hinted they had been around there for centuries.

At first, the terrain remained flat, but it did not last. Soon enough, the path – it was not large enough to be considered a road – led her into a slow but steady ascension up a hill.

The tall and old trees became sparser, and by the time Alexandra reached the summit, there were none of them left.

And someone had built a tower there.

Or at least it had been a tower, once upon a time.

“I could almost believe you are Amon Sûl, my poor tower.” The stones had been originally white, that much the Champion of the Morrigan had been pretty sure...much like some tragedy had befallen it. “Were the armies of the Last Alliance able to meet there, I wonder?”

It had taken her a long time to reach this near-forgotten tower; Alexandra figured she might as well enjoy the view at the top. There were taller peaks on her left, but this hill should give her a nice idea of what Avalon looked like in terms of landscape.

Besides, the stairs looked to be in a good state.

There were over one hundred of them, and they did not seem as if they had been built for the convenience of travellers...probably a good thing so few came these days.

It was only mere heartbeats before the ascension was over that Alexandra felt it.

Light magic.

Light magic, but not healthy and wild like the Unicorns she had watched today. This was like...a dying fire.

Alexandra advanced, very slowly.

“I know it is you, Morgane,” a voice that seemed broken resonated in the air. “Why are you trying to hide? Afraid of contemplating the result of your actions?”

Alexandra took great care to not stumble in the debris, and once she went around an enormous broken pillar, she was able to see who had spoken.

The man, for it was a man, was incredibly old.

He must have been tall in his youth, for even here, visibly unable to stand like a vigorous tree, he was far taller than her, and his arms must have been those of a warrior, along with enormous broad shoulders.

He had a long white beard, but not like the one Dumbledore had. It was as if it had grown suddenly, and its owner had been so surprised by its growth that he had no time to keep it fashionable.

The more Alexandra approached, the more she felt the enormous enchantments present here. She took two more steps...and suddenly an enormous magical blue wall burst into existence.

No, the young witch corrected inside her mind; it wasn’t created, it had just revealed itself to her eyes.

This was...something monstrously complex. The glyphs shining, the esoteric flows of magic, the myriad of wards coalescing into a single structure, it was a piece of magic so complicated that her eyes were hurting. Why the hell had she never heard of-

Oh.

Right, she had heard of this piece of magic.

“So it is the legendary Fortress of Air. The rumours did not make it justice.”

“It is,” the voice was old and weak, but there was still something the shadow of something incredibly powerful remaining...something that had not broken, no matter the trials and the indignities suffered. “You are not Morgane. And you are not Mordred.”

Four years ago, this was not a conversation Alexandra had ever thought she would have.

But this world...this was world was terrible, and yet full of surprises and magical wonders.

“My name,” the Ravenclaw Champion began, “is Alexandra Potter. You are Emrys Myrddin, I presume.”

**16 February 1995, King’s Cross Station, London, England**

Albus had never believed once in his lifetime he would be saved by Cornelius Fudge of all people.

Yet that was exactly what had happened today.

Thanks to this cowardly and selfish politician calling himself the Minister of Magic for Britain, Albus had been forced to return in a hurry last night, in order to make sure Cornelius Fudge and his favourite cronies didn’t try to place the blame for several financial frauds on him when they were responsible in the first place.

As a result, the Defeater of Grindelwald was free to act as he wished when most of the Venetian Carnival’s participants were frozen in the colossal trap that had just shut its iron jaws.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts was not incapacitated or in a near-comatose state, cut away from the rivers of Time.

He just didn’t know if that was really good news.

“Was it what you tried to warn me of, Gellert?”

There was no answer, of course.

There would never be an answer anymore from *him*.

It was...strange.

For the better part of the last six months, Albus had tried his best not to think about him...not to think about Gellert Grindelwald.

It was only now, as the end of the magical society he’d ever known was about to collapse, that his thoughts were turning back to the man who had once been his lover.

“One hundred and thirteen years spent living a life filled with mysteries and secrets, accumulating wisdom, only to realise that at the end, I don’t know what to do.”

Silence answered him.

There was no one on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

The Hogwarts Express was not there, though it might soon change; no doubt in several hours, parents in despair would send their owls, pleading and screaming that their children had to return home before the storm broke.

“I don’t know what to do.”

Fawkes had told him in a clear and unambiguous manner it was utterly impossible for Phoenixes to move inside a city where time had been frozen. They could technically get inside...but they would get frozen like everyone who had tried that.

And since they couldn’t get inside and break the ritual which had caused this, this very much meant the Statute of Secrecy was no more.

How did you hide a city cut off from time, a volcano, and a flying rock pouring fresh water from seemingly nowhere?

You couldn’t.

How were you suppose to explain the fact a fake ‘Black Sun’ was here, everywhere magic was engulfing old and young certainties?

You couldn’t.

The Muggles who were aware of the Statute’s existence, and they were far many than Albus was comfortable with, were going to ask for explanations.

He was the Defeater of Grindelwald, the former Supreme Mugwump, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and thanks to his Order of Merlin First Class, he was held a seat in the august assembly of the Wizengamot.

He was Albus Dumbledore.

And he had nothing to give them.

Well, not nothing...there was something he was certain about.

“I should never have trusted this demon of ‘Archmage’. I should never have trusted Ra.”

At least the madman had been frozen along with the rest of the city. Thank the forces of Good for this small piece of good news. Albus wished the ancient wizard was sealed away for all eternity, especially given who he was imprisoned with, but somehow, he didn’t believe he would be that lucky.

“And now I don’t know what to do...”

Two figures walked through the magical barrier separating the Wizarding part of the station from its Muggle counterpart.

And Albus was instantly on his guard.

Yes, there had been an urgent secret message urgently requesting his presence here...but while the letter had been signed by two of his students, the young adults that were rushing towards him were not them.

Albus drew the Elder Wand.

“Stop,” he ordered, letting his voice take the voice of command he had not dared using in many decades.

“Professor! We have to-“

“Do not call me Professor, impostor!” Albus felt really insulted, to say the truth. Polyjuice or other methods of impersonating another wizard’s identity were hardly cheap and available at every street corner, but this attempt reeked of Knut-worth amateurism. “Who are you, and what have you done to Neville Longbottom and Leo Black?”

**16 February 1995, Avalon**

“You are Emrys Myrddin, I presume.”

The old wizard laughed back.

“And you are the latest copy of Mordred to walk upon this world. Don’t bother open your mouth to deny it. The green eyes of the Ragnarok copies are quite recognisable. And the ravens following you...once again, the Morrigan blessed your line.”

Alexandra was a bit surprised, but as she turned her eyes towards the top of the ruins, there were indeed plenty of ravens watching her. It looked like Death had come to watch the conversation.

“I won’t waste my saliva denying it, no. Besides, I fought your friend the Archmage a few hours ago. He was able to watch many of my magical skills firsthand; secrecy isn’t something I can much rely upon for the years ahead.”

“I know Dark Champions who have invented better lies,” the prisoner of the Fortress of Air countered. “An insect like you has no chance against Ra.”

“Well, I will admit he cut my arm and destroyed Fragarach,” Alexandra pulled up her left sleeve, showing the neat mark where her original arm had been severed. “And I along with every Dark Champion was likely able to horribly die when Osiris arrived. But I managed to make him bleed...and I made sure he had no more Champion of Fate.”

“Another will come.” The wizard most legends knew as Merlin snapped back.

“Will it?” she asked.

The entire body of the prisoner seemed to be enduring great pain in the seconds after her question, and Alexandra didn’t receive an answer.

This made her raise an eyebrow. While there wasn’t a library worth of reliable information to go around, the Potter Heiress had been under the impression Myrddin was the closest thing to a peer the Archmage of Light had. ‘Merlin’ was a Phoenix Animagus. ‘Merlin’ founded the Knights of the Round Table, the organisation which would eventually become the Army of Light.

‘Merlin’ was immortal and a formidable Light Mage, one so powerful the Exchequer had to imprison him in the Fortress of Air, because they weren’t able to kill him.

Yet at this hour, Alexandra was looking at an old man so far from his prime that he made Dumbledore look like a model of good health and vitality.

In fact, in less than a minute, Alexandra could see massive wrinkles appear on his face. Grey hair was becoming white, before literally falling from his head. The old man that had ‘welcomed’ her was already a thing of the past; Emrys Myrddin was looking like he was losing a year of life per thirty seconds.

There was nothing that-

No, there was something that could explain it.

“You were never a true Champion of the Light.” The moment she said it, Alexandra knew it was true. “Ra wanted to create a second Avatar of the Light, but the Powers denied you. But you managed to steal enough power to give yourself the abilities to change into a Phoenix. Except it had a fatal weakness. Unlike Ra, this form was never tied to all the Light Powers in existence. It was tied to Life as long as it remained Light.”

And now Life was Fire, not Light.

Alexandra nodded in admiration as the plan of the Exchequer was revealed.

Osiris and his forces had failed to kill Ra, but a failure in one direction did not mean they couldn’t score other victories. By making Life a ‘Neutral Power’ again – not one associated to Light or the Dark anyway – they had ensured the second most dangerous Light Wizard in existence would die in short order.

And since Ra was affected by the time-freeze of Venice, there was really no one to understand the implications of this colossal defeat.

“It is your fault.”

“Oh?”

“It is the Dark who has forced us to such extremities.”

Ah, great. A new...pardon, an old fanatic.

“Really.” The sarcasm was incredibly obvious, but Emrys Myrddin seemed to not notice it.

“It was Osiris who killed the High Vizier, pretending the Archmage had failed the Trial of Shadow and was unfit to sit on the Throne of Pharaoh! It was Osiris, who refused to accept his eternal banishment from the lands which would later be known as Aegyptus, and went on to spread discord and destroy the harvests! It was Osiris who refused to see the magnificence of the Light, and chose to corrupt one by one six Powers so that they couldn’t be purified by the Ultimate Sun’s radiance.”

Alexandra stared at him horrified.

No, please, please, let it be a misunderstanding.

The true implications were too awful to seriously contemplate.

“Before this...before Ra and Osiris were born...there weren’t Light Powers?”

“There was only the Light Power of Innocence,” Merlin acknowledged with ill-grace, “but the Eternal Pharaoh was unable to see his favourite son was consorting with the fell Power of Darkness! Decisive measures had to be ordered, or the taint of the Dark would be impossible to extirpate!”

Alexandra stared speechless for several seconds. The shock was too important.

Ra. It was this bastard’s fault from the beginning.

Had he killed the ‘High Vizier’ and his father the ‘Eternal Pharaoh’? There was a good likelihood it was the case.

And then he had banished his brother, taken the throne...and began to turn Powers like Life into Light Powers, whether they desired it or not.

Seen it like that, it was no wonder that Life had returned to Fire so easily. It belonged to Fire originally, and had never been supposed to be Light. Moreover, there was also the problem that if there was only one Light Power at the beginning, then there was only one ‘Plane of Light’...aka a single ‘Light power source’.

Order, Judgement, Life, Wisdom, Unity, and Fate must have been ritually severed from their former magical sources, and added to what had been Innocence’s former realm.

In the short-term, it had massively boosted the Light’s abilities, with the Light Wizards of the time. But in the long-term, as the Grail and Excalibur were created, the Light began to die. Making Fate a Light Power had only accelerated the phenomenon, for while it gave easy victories, Ra and his allies decided to rely upon it as their chief weapon, and it must have not been a cheap magical measure.

“You will not suffer enough for all the lives you have ruined, *Emrys Myrddin*.”

“Hypocritical words! How many innocent lives have you taken for your damned mistress?”

“None,” Alexandra replied honestly with a smirk. “The majority of the souls I send on the other side of the Veil these days are Light fanatics like you, and their hands are so covered in blood their guilt isn’t in question.”

“You are a monster,” the nose of the Archmage’s peer began to bleed.

“Did you or did you not try to kill Mordred as a baby? Did you or did you not try to kill all the druids of the Isles?”

“IT WAS NECESSARY! THEY WERE GROWING A NEW YGGDRASIL ON THIS ISLAND! I HAD TO MAKE SURE AVALON WOULDN’T CORRUPT THE ISLES! AVALON HAD TO BURN TO SAVE THE REALM!”

Alexandra couldn’t help but flinch.

The Champion of Death looked in the eyes of her enemy...and saw only madness.

It was not the mad glint of Chaos she had perceived in Lyudmila’s irises.

It was a fiery, brutal ocean of fanatical devotion to the Light.

There would be no peace or negotiated settlement with the Light as long as someone like Ra or Myrddin was in charge.

Was it the truth the King of the Exchequer had glimpsed long ago?

“Camlann wasn’t a mistake, wasn’t it? This is the glorious Fate you have decided to forge for every living being that refuses the slavery of the Light...”

The extremely complex enchantment of the Fortress of Air began to weaken. Several wards snapped with loud noises.

This was unsurprising as numerous wounds reopened on Merlin’s body and the more seconds passed, the more his face looked like an evil mummy. The Fortress of Air was tied to his life...and the latter was close to the end.

“Ra...will kill you.”

“Maybe,” Alexandra nodded while her Changelina materialised her rapier back in her hand. “But you won’t be there to see it. And I have bad news for you, oh Archmage of the Hypocrites. The Grail is broken. No more Knight’s Quests to kill wizards and witches and take their unwilling blood for your abominable rituals.”

“You...lie!”

Alexandra saluted with her blade...and then attacked.

The Fortress of Air failed.

Her rapier found the heart.

“Death will not be vanquished.”

In the end, Myrddin shrieked and screamed as his life ended.

He was still screaming when the Morrigan claimed his soul and began his punishment.

**16 February 1995, King’s Cross Station, London, England**

Five minutes of explanation, and Albus could very well believe it was an adult version of Neville Longbottom he was pointing his wand against.

Alas, the reasons why he could believe so were definitely not positive.

One might even say they were just disastrous.

“Mister Longbottom...” for all his long career politician, Albus couldn’t restrain himself from showing a very disappointed expression. “You were made aware of what sort of vile artefact made the opening of the Chamber of Secrets possible. What possessed you two years later to think that drinking from the artefact you called the ‘Grail’ to be any different?”

“Don’t you dare comparing the Grail to a *Horcrux*!”

“Mister Black, for once in your life, do the right thing and shut up!” Dumbledore replied aggressively.

Mercifully, the son of Sirius Black obeyed.

The Defeater of Grindelwald refocused his attention on the young adult who may be one day the rightful Lord of House Longbottom...if he didn’t die due another stupid mistake before that, of course.

“This cursed artefact appeared to give you great power, along with a mastery of magics you were struggling to understand the basics,” Albus continued in a softer tone. “I understand how seducing it can be. But as you just yourself just admitted, these new skills, including your Animagus form, were not able to give your victory. You even fell into a trap of another Champion because you were confident your opponent lacked the raw power you were given.”

“But I didn’t know Potter was a Hydra Animagus,” the Boy-Who-lived tried to argue back, “if I’d known-“

“If you’d known, the end result would have been exactly the same,” Albus told bluntly the Gryffindor. Days ago he might have softened the blow, but giving false optimism was certainly one of the reasons this entire Tournament was such a disaster. “Alexandra Potter is far stronger than you, and from all evidence I have, she has a far better idea of her limits than you ever did. Leading you into a trap where her Animagus form could easily kill you is exactly the kind of things the Ravenclaw Champion has done so far in this Tournament.”

“But we have to kill her.”

“Mister Black, I think I told you to *shut up*!” For some reason, the voice of Sirius Black’s son was deeply irritating him. And it was hard to keep control of his emotions. “You are going to do nothing of the sort. First, it is highly likely that the method you used to avoid the time-freezing of Venice wasn’t available to the other Champions. If it is the case, no one has the reach to do anything, since the city is cut off from the outside world at the moment.”

“And if they are? If they are right now outside, plotting the downfall of the Light?”

The tone was so filled with hatred that it rang several mental alarms in his head.

Albus slightly altered his position with the Elder Wand, and grabbed one of his Alchemical inventions in his pocket.

“If they are, the Wizarding World is in such dire straits that I am not going to condone a punitive expedition, and if you dare trying, I will make sure to know in front of the Wizengamot you are a dangerous fool that deserves a life-sentence in Azkaban.”

“A coward to the end, I see! EXPELLIARMUS MAXIMUS!”

But the Chief Warlock was ready. The powder was already in the air, and the shield he conjured was so well-practised it stopped the red-coloured spell had no chance to touch him, making the disarmament attempt an utter failure.

And then the young man screamed, for the Alchemical powder was stuck on his face...and there was a mirror-like effect, one temporarily vanishing the looks of Leo Black, and replacing them by something else...or more accurately, the face of someone else.

“Possession,” Albus Dumbledore said coldly, “you are not Leo Black. Who are you?”

“The rightful King of Britannia, fool!” The impostor tried to attack, and the former Supreme Mugwump had to admit, the spells were masterfully cast and well above NEWT-level.

“Britannia has not had a King for fifteen centuries. And it doesn’t need one!”

But he was Albus Dumbledore, and it was not mere luck that had seen him survive duels against several Dark Lords. Shields were reacted, and after several seconds, Albus counterattacked.

In a few seconds, Albus had already transfigured several statues of the station into enormous animals and statues of stone.

So many people failed to realise the sheer versatility of Transfiguration. Too bad for them. One of his giant birds missed skewering the other duellist. The next spear drew blood.

The young man who had pretended to be Leo Black screamed in rage, and grabbed a...teacup?

“THIS IS NOT OVER! BRITANNIA BELONGS TO THE LIGHT!”

Albus tried to stop him, but it was too late. He had been so preoccupied that he had not thought to cast anti-Portkey magic when they arrived...and when his transfigured animals struck, the claws and fangs met only smoke.

“What...what just happened?”

The face of the Boy-Who-Lived...or was it the Man-Who-Lived now? Anyway, the expression of Neville Longbottom was one of a wizard waking up from a long and dreadful nightmare.

“I think,” the Defeater of Grindelwald said darkly, “that I would like very much the answer to this interesting question.”

**16 February 1995, Avalon**

When Myrddin died, he left no corpse behind.

There was a series of whispers, and then it was if the legendary mage of Camelot was transformed into embers and dust, rapidly dispersed by the wind.

Alexandra watched it with a melancholic expression. That Emrys Myrddin had deserved to die was not in doubt in her mind. But once again, she could only sigh at the sheer waste of magical potential. Once again one of the ‘wise and old wizards’ had proven himself to be nothing more than a monstrous assassin. Where were the forests grown by magic? Where was the Lothlorien? Where were the well-prosperous kingdoms and the underground caverns?

So far, the true marvels of this year had been essentially concentrated within the boundaries of the Scuola Regina or created by the Exchequer. The Light, on the other hand, seemed to be content on revealing more and more artefacts of genocidal destruction.

Alexandra didn’t know how long she stayed there, in the middle of the Avalonian Amon Sûl.

To be honest, the Hydra Animagus didn’t know why she was staying there. There was no Last Alliance of the forces of Good. The Exchequer, the closest thing there was to an ally in this war of Dark and Light, was better than Ra’s fanatics, but it was a low bar to beat. And what her friends and she had...it was too little, too late.

The Statute of Secrecy was no more. It wouldn’t wait for her to grow into adulthood and recruit a diversified powerbase.

When she stopped watching the wild landscape of Avalon, the Dark Sun had disappeared, and the night had fallen. Now there was a sea of stars above her head.

The young witch admired them for several minutes before turning back and descending back the hill.

It was good she had night vision, because in the dark, the stone stairs were looking far more treacherous than they did when she had used them the first time.

Someone was waiting for her on the rocks marking the informal barrier between what had been Myrddin’s prison and the large forest.

Alexandra had expected that.

What she had not expected was that the witch waiting for her would be Lyudmila Romanov.

“A drink?” The Dark Queen asked, crystal glass already in hand. “I don’t know about you, but killing always me thirsty.”

“I hope it’s not the horrible stuff that so many Durmstrang students got dead drunk with,” Alexandra wrinkled her nose.

“Nah, the locals gave me the permission to grab a bottle of red wine,” the other Champion ‘reassured’ her. “This should be a fruity drink.”

“In this case, I suppose I should accept.” Alexandra sighed. “Though it’s more because I am mentally exhausted by the killing of Venice. What happened here doesn’t count.”

The glass materialised in her hand, and promptly filled with red nectar. Lyudmila was right; it smelled a lot like several fruits the Ravenclaw Champion with.

“I sensed you killed someone.”

Alexandra shrugged.

“I gave the *coup-de-grâce*, as the French would say. But Emrys Myrddin was a dead wizard long before I visited these ruins.”

“Merlin was about to die, but he was...ah, I see.” The blonde witch was surprised, but it didn’t last long. “So that was what they were after, by attuning Light to Fire. And here I was thinking the Dark Fossil wasn’t ambitious.”

For a good minute, they sipped the red wine and didn’t talk.

Alexandra was the first to speak again.

“How did you find me? You didn’t follow me in the first place.”

“You have to learn how to **listen** to the magic, Alexandra. Don’t worry. It gets easier as you are more and more synchronized with your Power.”

Most of the hint went way over her head. However-

“This island isn’t really imbued with the Power of Chaos.”

“Yes. But what happened fifteen centuries ago left a mark on Avalon. The island, on the surface, has recovered. But some wounds remain. And **Loki** remembers.”

There was a gust of wind that was cold and absolutely natural.

“Myrddin admitted razing the island.”

“He did far worse than that. He killed most of the Druids, the Elves, and the Dwarves who had found refuge there, and those who weren’t slaughtered, they were dragged in chains. They died as slaves or as ritual-fodder. Even by the standards of the time, this atrocity was beyond the pale, and it was one of many things that convinced thousands of wizards to rise up against the Light Fossil.”

Alexandra wished she could say it was all untrue. But after speaking with the ‘allies’ of the Archmage...

At least, it had let her to think about several questions.

“Was **Chaos** the original Power of the Dark?

“And what makes you think that?” the Dark Queen grinned.

“Whatever name you choose to call him, Ra’s sycophant loved the sound of his own voice before I ended his nasty and vile life.”

“This doesn’t-“

“Lyudmila.”

The Tsar’s daughter huffed.

“Fine, fine. Yes, **Chaos** is the original Dark Power, all other banded together into the darkness so that the mad Archmage couldn’t do more damage than what was already done. But it was millennia ago...Alexandra.”

“And yet the Exchequer found a way to return Light as a Power of Fire. Moreover, it directly resulted in the death of a Phoenix Animagus tied to Life.”

For all her flaws, which included plunging metaphorically her hand into a well of horrifying magics, Lyudmila Romanov was not an imbecile.

“You think Ra’s enormous reserves of Light Magic and his immortality are tied to the Light Powers themselves.”

“No need to fight him head-on like we tried in the Plaza di San Marco.” And it was fortunate, because a second duel had every chance to result in a very painful death. “If it is the same as the not-so-impressive ‘Merlin’, we have a chance.”

“That’s all well and good,” the Durmstrang Champion said, and Alexandra knew that there was going to be a problem, “but with the plans of certain arrogant fossils having failed, I doubt you can achieve it before the Grail blows up.”

“Provided we can evacuate all the Champions and spectators out of the city, the collateral damage will be limited to Venice itself.”

“Alexandra.” The green eyes which turned towards her were almost hypnotic by their intensity. “The Grail’s destruction is going to release so much Light magic that it’s going to kill everything that is not ‘pure’ enough by the standards of the Army of Light. Save some Unicorns and the surviving Light Champions, I don’t know if there is anyone else who can endure *that*.” Lyudmila paused, and then continued her litany of bad news. “Venice will most likely be annihilated in the initial blast, as will everything in a range of several kilometres. Then it will get worse. The Light will sterilise everything, trees or animals, that won’t be sufficiently ‘Light’. I wouldn’t be surprised if most of the Italian Peninsula’s population is instantly killed.”

“That’s...” Alexandra grimaced. It was way, way worse than anything her worst nightmares had imagined. “That’s awful. But surely no matter how powerful the Grail’s blast will be, the destructive wave of Light magic must have some range limit, right?”

“Well, Arithmancy is not where my strengths lie,” the Champion of Loki’s lips twitched, ‘”but I would say...by the times it gets to Gibraltar, it should have lost most of its potency. There shouldn’t be more than a few hundred deaths there...”

Gibraltar. As in the Rock of Gibraltar.

By everything that was holy. The Grail’s destructive blast, assuming it spread in every direction, was going to kill most of Europe.

“This...we must stop this...before it is too late.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure the dear old crone...I mean our gracious host...has some kind of ridiculously overcomplicated plan to save the day and advance her own plans.” Lyudmila sipped her wine, and damn, Alexandra hadn’t finished her first glass that the Dark Queen had already emptied three. “Prevent the Grail from blowing up in our faces, make sure the Light Fossil won’t hunt us for the next centuries...who knows, we might even save the Venetian Carnival in time to don our costumes again!”

The last point saw the Dark Queen roll her eyes. Apparently, someone had yet to forgive the costume-makers for forcing her to don an ‘Arlequina’ costume.

“Save the Carnival,” Alexandra raised the crystal glass and watched the stars. “Save the world. This is a Quest I can approve.”

“I can too...” the serious expression didn’t last more than a heartbeat, and was replied by something more malicious, “as long as proper Chaos can be unleashed, of course!”

**Author’s note**: Welcome to Avalon. But if you think the storm won’t reach these shores in due time, you are way too optimistic...

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