**Chapter 82**

**Light of Fourth Year**

**1 September 1994, Hogwarts Express**

“The problem with kissing under an invisibility cloak, you know, is that you don’t see you have lipstick everywhere.” Morag commented as Alexandra entered the compartment of the Hogwarts Express.

Alexandra didn’t even bother to check.

“For your personal curiosity, if I had lipstick ‘everywhere’, I would have smelled it and erased all marks well before coming here,” the Hydra Animagus barely raised an eyebrow in answer. “And why should I hide under an invisibility cloak? It’s not like dating a person of the same sex like you is against the law...”

Dumbledore and the Houses supporting him were often very conservative and prompt to forbid many fields which had been considered ‘normal’ by wizards and witches, but the Headmaster of Hogwarts had not been hypocrite enough – cough, Grindelwald, cough – to pass laws of that nature.

“Oh, never mind, then,” the Irish redhead said, as they were soon joined by Nigel and Luna, then Hermione. Seconds later after their chief library-lover and expert in books of all sorts, the Hogwarts Express slowly left King’s Cross Station and the famous nine and three-quarters’ quay.

“And so a new year at Hogwarts begins,” Nigel said, opening the yesterday’s edition of the *Daily Prophet* where it was announced that Fudge had managed to set several factions of the Wizengamot against each other, thus saving his political career...at least for this month. Motions of no-confidence in a Minister could only be done once every thirty-one days, otherwise the Wizengamot would have not been able to do a lot of work done...not that it did good work, you understand.

Alexandra allowed a smirk to show on her lips.

“For the ‘new school year’, I agree. For the ‘Hogwarts’ part...well, it might be superfluous.”

Neither Dumbledore nor McGonagall had yet announced how soon they would depart for the Scuola Regina and the European Magical Tournament, but the latest possible date was still very soon. The Opening Ceremony was Samhain, at the end of October 1994. Assuming they departed the day before, this was merely two months of school at Hogwarts, compared to the seven spent in the Italian peninsula.

“Some of us are still attending this venerable castle.”

“Yes,” Alexandra yawned, “I will make sure to ask you how it goes every time we meet the days of the trials,” most of the participating schools’ student bodies were invited by the Venetians. One part of her was convinced this was to give everyone the chance of supporting their favourite schoolmates. The other part acknowledged that the humiliation of the defeated was going to be more total and impossible to deny if it happened before your entire school. “I’m not intending to spend a lot of time in Dumbledore’s last bastion this year.”

“You think he would try....something?”

“No,” Alexandra shook her head before amending. “Or at least, not given a powerful incentive. The problem is that I ignore how much the old man is in contact with other Light organisations. I also have no idea how badly he took some unpleasant news about my skills and the actions I did. And finally, I am completely unsure how many of my abilities I will have to use once the Tournament begins. Given all these uncertainties it’s better to limit my visits to Hogwarts to the strict minimum. I prefer arrange International Portkeys for those of you who want to urgently speak with me. It will be far simpler, and the grounds of the Scuola Regina are far safer than those of Hogwarts.”

“There will be plenty of Dark Wizards there,” Hermione noted.

“Last year, we had Dementors and Light killers at Hogsmeade, and the year before that, two Basilisks and an attack group of Junior Death Eaters,” Alexandra sardonically reminded her friend.

“Speaking of the latter...”

“Except Blaise, all the Champions of House Slytherin have suddenly become really, really expendable.”

The Champion of the Morrigan didn’t know if Warrington and Montague had brand-new Dark Marks burning dark on their forearms, but she wasn’t going to bet on the contrary.

“You may have a problem in this case,” Morag replied slowly. “Blaise is the third replacement, not the fourth. He will participate before Lucian Bole.”

“I had noticed,” the green-eyed Champion shrugged. “It’s possible Bole will return to Hogwarts without missing limbs. I am not going to plot to injure Blaise just for the pleasure of seeing one more Slytherin get his comeuppance.”

Lady Stella Zabini had given her a home for the summers, and it was so much better than the Dursleys that the two locations might as well be on another continent. She wasn’t going to throw Blaise to the wolves just to get one more Junior Death Eater...especially as she wasn’t sure Bole was a supporter of Voldemort.

“Besides, Bole and his friend Derrick are just older versions of Crabbe and Goyle.” ‘Smart’ was not a word she was going to use them for sure.

“How these two weren’t told to repeat their third year after the terrific grades they got, I have no idea,” Hermione intervened.

“Failing standards,” Luna looked up from her extended *Quibbler*. “The Heliopaths ate their brains.”

“Err...yes.” The bushy-haired Ravenclaw cleared her throat before continuing. “Anyway, has someone heard who are going to be the next DADA teachers this year?”

“No,” Alexandra admitted before grimacing. “But given what is coming, I fear I am really, really not going to enjoy our peerless Headmaster’s ‘surprise’.”

**1 September 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The Exiled and the other students of Hogwarts had embarked at King’s Cross Station under a half-sunny, half-cloudy weather. Whether it was cloudier or sunnier was no doubt the subject of fierce debates in the compartments.

What wasn’t in doubt, however, was the fact they arrived at Hogwarts under a thick curtain of rain.

“By the white towers lost and forgotten, has someone miscast meteorology spells...again?” Alexandra groaned while hurrying up on the marble steps.

“That or the wards of the region which are supposed to enforce the Statute also increase the potency of the Scottish climate beyond what it should be,” Hermione answered as they finally reached the Entrance Hall and its warmth. “Why is there so much water on the ground, by the way?”

“Peeves,” George Weasley grimaced, his usual humour partially absent as he massaged his throat. “Professor McGonagall chased him away a minute ago.”

“Ah, one more poltergeist crisis,” it said quite something that it had become something that was making Alexandra bored. “Well, let’s go into the Great Hall. I’m quite hungry.”

“You’re always hungry, Alex...”

“I blame Hermione.”

“Hey!”

Alexandra gave her an innocent smile.

“*Someone*,” she really insisted on the word, “was of the opinion we needed to eat only a minimum of sweets and other chocolate delicacies. And last I checked, it wasn’t me.”

“My parents are dentists, you know. They know better than you what is good for your teeth.”

The Potter Heiress rolled her eyes. Aside from regularly brushing her teeth – dental hygiene was important, never forget it people – the Hydra Animagus doubted she would ever have problems there. Much like the heads of her inner animal were reborn after being cut, a fang torn out also regenerated, sometimes faster than you could say it.

“Yes, yes. Let’s hope the Sorting isn’t going to take too long.”

“With how each generation after us is getting more students, it’s not exactly likely,” Morag muttered between her teeth. “I don’t see any new Professors at the Head Table.”

“Not everyone has yet arrived,” the Basilisk-Slayer commented. Something made clear by the fact Professor Flitwick was just taking his Charmed seat – unless their Head of House wanted to eat on the floor or have a chair too huge for his body, levitation was necessary – and the two Professors of Potions arrived, as cold and detached from the rest of the staff as it was possible to be.

“I’m quite happy to not take any classes with them this year,” Alexandra admitted.

“And I hope they will allow us to sign up with the Potions class of our year once we’re in Venetia,” Morag added.

“Maybe they truly have failed to recruit one more DADA teacher,” Hermione said worriedly.

“Given how fast they die,” Alexandra whispered as more and more Ravenclaws took their seats – it seemed the table was longer, and the Hydra-eyed witch was sure it wasn’t her imagination. “It will certainly happen one day.”

Still, as the gatekeeper Hagrid took his over-large chair and Professor McGonagall arrived with the new first-years in tow, three empty seats remained unaccounted for. Since Professor Grubby-Plank had stayed to teach Care of Magical Creatures and the rest of the teachers, including Divination and this useless fraud of Trelawney, were present, this left only the duo of Defence against the Dark Arts missing.

But tradition was tradition, and so before a crowd of eleven years-old boys and girls who had to be between ninety and one hundred, a stool was installed it and on it the Sorting Hat was presented.

*A thousand years or more ago,*

*When I was newly sewn,*

*There lived four wizards of renown,*

*Whose names are still well known:*

*Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,*

*Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,*

*Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,*

*Shrewd Slytherin, from fen.*

*They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,*

*They hatched a daring plan*

*To educate young sorcerers*

*Thus Hogwarts School began.*

*Now each of these four founders*

*Formed their own house, for each*

*Did value different virtues*

*In the ones they had to teach.*

*By Gryffindor, the bravest were*

*Prized far beyond the rest;*

*For Ravenclaw, the cleverest*

*Would always be the best;*

*For Hufflepuff, hard workers were*

*Most worthy of admission;*

*And power-hungry Slytherin*

*Loved those of great ambition.*

*While still alive they did divide*

*Their favourites from the throng,*

*Yet how to pick the worthy ones*

*When they were dead and gone?*

*’Twas Gryffindor who found the way,*

*He whipped me off his head*

*The founders put some brains in me*

*So I could choose instead!*

*Now slip me snug about your ears,*

*I’ve never yet been wrong,*

*I’ll have a look inside your mind*

*And tell where you belong!’*

The applause rose to the enchanted sky, the Deputy Headmistress unrolled the large scroll of parchment in her hands, and the Sorting began. Ackerley Stewart immediately began the first new Ravenclaw, and from there everyone applauded after every choice of the Sorting Hat. Alexandra couldn’t help but feel a twinge of sadness all the while. If unity between the Founders was so important, why was the Sorting such a big deal? They should be allowed to choose their Houses or create their own ones for each generation. Because really, what did they truly know about the Founders beyond the usual platitudes? Not much.

At last Orla Quirke was sent to Ravenclaw and Kevin Whitby to Hufflepuff, and the Sorting Hat was carried away until another year’s September.

Dumbledore rose from his chair, and seriously, his mauve robe was a true fashion crime with his silver beard.

“I have only two words to say to you. Tuck in.”

“Hurrah,” the Exiled murmured as the empty dishes filled magically before their eyes.

Alexandra began with a fish soup – the House Elves had not forgotten her previous recommendations, she would have to thank them – and after that more delicious meat and salmon found their ways in her plate.

Between two bites, Alexandra noticed how Morag’s dinner also was...carnivorous-oriented, though it was meat which predominated for her, not sea food.

Not that they were entirely loyal to the regime of mythical and non-mythical predators, of course. After the main course, there were chocolate cakes and fruit tarts. Bless her Animagus form for allowing her to eat so many good things.

Several minutes later after everyone had stopped eating, what remained of the large meals disappeared, and Dumbledore rose for the second time.

“So! Now that we are all fed and watered, I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices. Mr Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Fake Wands, Ever-Bashing Boomerangs, Tricky Treats, and many numerous goods invented by pranksters I will not name. The full list comprises some six hundred and one items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr Filch’s office, if anybody would like to check it.”

Dumbledore and the entirety of the staff feigned to have not noticed the way a miniature ‘W’ firework was burning in orange light over Fred and George’s heads.

“I would also like to remind you all that the Forbidden Forest is out-of-bounds to students, which is why we call it ‘Forbidden’. The village of Hogsmeade, restored after events of last year, is not accessible until you have reached third year.”

A twirl of the Headmaster’s wand and the orange animations of the Terrible Duo of twins vanished. Alexandra wondered what sort of Charm he had used to arrive to that result. The Morrigan knew she had tried, but the creations of Fred and George rarely were dissipated by a mere Finite Incantatem.

“I am also afraid I am the bearer of bad news: the inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year.”

A few throats shouted their disappointment, but the rest remained silent. A lot of students had already anticipated this might be the case.

“As I’m sure you are all aware, the European Magical Tournament, a new inter-school competition derived from the ancient Tri-Wizard Tournament, is organised on the lands of the Ministry of Magical Venice this year, and Hogwarts is participating. This academic series of challenges also includes an inter-school Quidditch Tournament, whose player’s selection will take place during the next week-ends. With several players of our regular school teams already unable to participate due to their Champion titles and the needs of at least ten more players for a regular inter-House team, continuing to organise the Quidditch House Cup at Hogwarts would make little sense, as well as take great amount of time of the teacher’s time, energy, and skill when they have far more pressing obligations.”

Once this point was made, the Duelling team’s preliminaries were announced right after it. There was a mention that like the Quidditch selections, ICW officials would be there to oversee them and make sure the participants understood for what they were signing for; the competitions were of course far less dangerous than the ‘true’ Tournament, but you had to be skilled and trained for the duels ahead.

“For the main Tournament itself,” Dumbledore continued after a series of explanations which must have bored the first-years to death, “Hogwarts will be represented by-“

The doors of the Great Wall were pushed open with impressive strength, and from outside, a loud rumble of thunder drowned everything.

Three new ‘guests’ had invited themselves in the Great Hall, two men and one woman.

They were...well, they had not much in common, to be honest. The woman was very, very young, to the point she looked like she was barely out of Hogwarts, at best twenty years old, maybe?

That said, with her pink hair, her black and purple clothes, she definitely sounded like someone not very concerned with the dictates of the British traditions. Only the simple red robe of a Junior Auror endorsed who she was.

The man on her left made her look stunning and absolutely beautiful. As ‘bubbly’ and spirit-free as the young witch appeared before their eyes, the wizard closest to her was quite simply...not pleasant to watch. The man’s face was scarred beyond belief. Part of his nose was clearly missing, one of his eyes was a magical prosthesis, one of his legs was not his original one or even made of flesh given how loud the ‘thuds’ were against the floor of the Great Hall.

Alexandra had seen prettier corpses arriving in Pandemonium. This man...how was he alive in the first place? Some of his injuries were clearly caused by Dark Magic.

At least there wasn’t much doubt about his identity. Retired Auror Alastor ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody. It could be no one else. Who had predicted the man would be the next DADA teacher again? Alexandra didn’t remember, but there had been one, and it seemed this person had won the betting pool.

Yet she felt little excitation about this prospect. Because there was the third person, the second wizard of the group, advancing in a silent Great Hall.

The man was not terrifying by his appearance or his size. He seemed to be as tall as Morag, who was far from a giant, even if she had grown much this summer. He had no visible scars, and his tanned skin, one shade or two removed from the colour black, was rather exotic.

His nose was a bit too long, and his eyes were a bit too strange to be considered attractive.

He had a vague Egyptian look, but of a type of a man not having been under this latitudes for long, long years. The fact he was bald reinforced a bit the ‘Egyptian scribe’ vibe, though.

And maybe it was the truth. Maybe he had been aged enough to see the construction of the pyramids.

Watching with her Animagus eyes, Alexandra was hard-pressed to not be blinded by the monstrous aura of pure Light burning in this apparently unimportant body.

And a song was playing from there. Inaudible for most ears, but not for her.

It was a symphony of order and light, of righteousness and intolerance.

It was a melody extremely similar to the one she had heard in an abandoned fortress in the middle of nowhere. The ruin of the old balance, the will of Light ascendant, the claim of Excalibur. What had this man done to gain abilities which were usually not handed to the Champions?

“**Ra, the Archmage of Light**,” the Morrigan told her, and Alexandra didn’t miss the sheer hatred in the Goddess’ voice.

And Dumbledore had invited this old monster in these walls.

In hindsight, the Ravenclaw Champion acknowledged she should have killed the Headmaster this summer.

**3 September 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Stop being so grumpy, Alex.”

“I am not grumpy, thank you very much,” the Basilisk-Slayer as she watched several novice players of House Hufflepuff try to figure out if they had correctly mounted their broom...once they were ten metres above the ground. Yes, they weren’t going to last long during today’s Quidditch preliminaries.

“You are grumpy. You have been like that since the arrival of the DADA teachers.”

“You know very well it is not the DADA teachers’ presence that concerns me.”

It had the merit of being true, by the way. Either as the Morrigan Champion or as the Heiress of House Potter, Alexandra didn’t care much about the paranoiac ex-Auror Dumbledore had hired. Though was it really paranoia when all the Death Eaters and their Master dreamed to take their turn torturing you?

“You aren’t going to underestimate ‘Mad-Eye’, don’t you? Your girlfriend is rather in awe of him.”

The Basilisk-Slayer smirked.

“Morag, I am not going to underestimate a man who was responsible for filling half of Azkaban cells before the recent break-out. Given how close he is to Dumbledore,” the man’s membership in the Order of the Phoenix was a poorly kept secret, “Moody must be aware of all the skills I’ve shown in recent years. And he’s sufficiently redoubtable to pounce on any mistake I will make if it comes to a battle between the two of us. So if I have to fight him, I won’t do it half-way. I will battle him at close-quarters, and I will transform. The man had to be a terror in his young days, but with a wooden prosthesis for his leg and the curses draining constantly his core, he is not as fast as a retired Auror should be. Close the distance, and roast him with lightning.”

“That’s...brutal.”

“But effective,” Alexandra winced as one Ravenclaw second-year who had tired...to dance on his broom? Suddenly lost his equilibrium and had his face meet the ground. Fortunately, the fall was less than fifty centimetres tall. “I’m a bit surprised Dumbledore called him to be the Senior DADA teacher, honestly. Between the curse on the DADA position, having an Apprentice, and the Board of Governors not being pleased by the choices of DADA Professors these last years, I would have thought Dumbledore would be a bit less...antagonistic. Moody is very much a guarantee there are going to be some sparks.”

“And he has one of your cousins as Apprentice.”

“It isn’t like I am exactly close to her, you know.” Counting the last couple of days, this would make the third time she had met Nymphadora don’t-call-me-that Tonks, Junior Auror. “And if we have to judge by the familial branches, *Draco Malfoy* is as much my cousin as she is. And you don’t see me spending time in his company.”

Speaking of the Slytherin nuisance, he was there all right. He and a multitude of members of the House of Salazar were walking in column towards the middle of the stadium, obviously intending to register for the preliminaries which would decide the Hogwarts Quidditch Team.

“Well no, you have some taste, Alex.” Morag grimaced. “I wish we could do these preliminaries to, if only to eliminate a maximum of idiots and morons. Is it unreasonable of me to blame the Headmaster for this decision of forbidding us to compete in other activities?”

“For once, I believe it is,” day after day the Headmaster was finding new reasons to infuriate her and advance her plan of ‘how to get rid of the Glorious Leader of the British Light’, but for this decision was rather sound of judgement. “The Tournament organisers have decreed the Quidditch and Duelling games are never going to be separated by more than forty-eight hours from the Trials of the Tournament. Planning to participate in both events is...at the limit of suicidal, unless you have nearly-unlimited powers of regeneration.”

And even then, it was just not wise. The Quidditch game was before the Trial? The Champion would have lost both energy and lucidity in the game while his or her opponents were in peak condition. The Task came first? Playing Quidditch after you could have received minor and major wounds from Curses and other spells was a risk few sane wizards and witches would take.

“No, Dumbledore took the good decision in that affair. Better the Champions focus on the Tasks which will be demanded of us while an entirely different team plays Quidditch.” Alexandra didn’t say ‘even if this team won’t be as good as it should be’. She really didn’t need to. Modesty and her past performances on the pitch were sufficient to acknowledge she wouldn’t have been selected as a starting player of Hogwarts, but there were many other boys and girls who would have had their chance. Cho Chang, Roger Davies for Ravenclaw. Angelina Johnson, Neville Longbottom for Gryffindor. Cedric Diggory and three players of House Hufflepuff were Champions. Warrington and Montague were banned from Quidditch, but they played...brutally.

“That way we are going to be humiliated on both sides if it turns against us?”

Alexandra grimaced. That wasn’t a bad point.

“It’s not good, but not having a player because he’s in the infirmary being treated with wounds due to the Tournament is not exactly going to boost the team-spirit, I think.”

“You don’t trust the new adult which has been added to our Tournament delegation?”

“Morag, you already know the answer to that one...”

At least she had the confirmation the Order of the Phoenix was allied with the other organisations who had recently manifested their desire to see her dead. It was always...satisfying to see that several of the contingency plans she had made had not been prepared in vain.

By the putrid breath of the Nazgûl, what kind of being did the silver-bearded Defeater of Grindelwald invite at Hogwarts? And as if it was nothing, he had confirmed him as temporary Head of House Gryffindor, Professor who was going to teach Light Magic ‘to all students satisfying the criteria’, and of course that the Egyptian-looking being would come with them to Venetia.

“I am going to need to train a lot if I want to have a chance to defeat two immensely powerful Light wizards, that’s all there is to say.” Unfortunately, this was easier said than done. First above all, Ra was far more dangerous than Dumbledore would ever be or had ever been. The Headmaster could drink a barrel of Felix Felicis for the day, and he would still come short of the ‘Archmage’. “Let’s forget it for a few hours. I see that Fred and George have decided to honour us with their presence for the Beater selections.”

“Yes,” Morag smiled. “This time they are going to be able to send Bludgers at a lot of Slytherins without breaking any rule...”

**4 September 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

These days, every time a teacher was not in sight and Draco had to listen to Theodore Nott was a torture.

“I heard you begged on your knees without using your wand once? Is that true...Squib Malfoy?”

The Heir of House Malfoy tensed, but he didn’t care drawing his wand from his pocket. Nott had not drawn his, true, but Crabbe and Goyle were escorting him, as was Pansy. And if he tried to attack, it would be their four wands against one. He was better than his former two...associates, but he wasn’t that good.

“Yes, just as I thought. You have nothing in the head, and nothing in the blood...*blood-traitor*!”

Footsteps were heard in the corridor, and Draco prayed it was a teacher or at least a Gryffindor. Someone who would stop Nott and his crowd from insulting and hexing him.

But it wasn’t a Gryffindor or a Professor. It was Alexandra Potter.

“What is happening here doesn’t concern you, Exiled Queen.” Nott commanded. Draco gaped. Had the other boy lost his mind?

“Theodore Nott,” he didn’t even see the ray of red light which struck Vincent Crabbe and Pansy. He barely was able to perceive the Petrificus Totalus which sent Goyle on the ground. “I was on my way to the library when I heard your last bigoted slurs.”

Nott tried to draw his wand. He was disarmed in the next second.

“You can’t...you can’t hurt me! I am a potential Champion for the Tournament!”

And he was supposed to be the coward?

Merciless green eyes stared at the nervous fourth-year Slytherin.

“Partially inexact. Since Malfoy here isn’t a vassal or an ally, it is true striking you down would create....complications.”

A victorious smirk returned to Nott’s face, and something in Draco’s guts poured more anxiety.

“Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson, and Bulstrode amongst others aren’t potential Champions, Nott.”

The smile of his rival disappeared again.

“You wouldn’t dare. You-“

“Be silent.” The words were not shouted, they were hissed in a cold voice. Nott shut up. “Better. I am tired to be enforcer of rules wherever your band of Junior Death Eaters is concerned, Nott. I thought having Daphne relaying the rules of what was acceptable and what was not acceptable would convince you to behave. Apparently, I overestimated your intelligence.”

“And what are you going to do?” the other Heir panicked.

“Nothing,” the Basilisk-Slayer of House Ravenclaw looked at him emotionlessly. “You are going to die in the European Magical Tournament, Nott. That much was never really in question.”

Draco had heard how this dumb bat of Trelawney sometimes was so convincing in her classroom she managed to convince a few idiots her predictions may happen.

It wasn’t like that here; Potter didn’t seem to care if they believed her or not. And yet there was something...terribly final the way it had been uttered.

“Cassius Warrington and Graham Montague are going to be Champions before me!”

Alexandra Potter inclined her head slightly.

“I am aware of this reality, yes. Their own painful demises have also been taken into account.”

Draco shivered. He had no more friendship with Nott, Warrington, or Montague, but the way Potter was speaking of it...

“You’re mad. You’re completely crazy! Dumbledore won’t let you kill the Champions of House Slytherin!”

The son of Narcissa Malfoy had to agree with him there. Whatever his faults and his disgusting policy-making, the Phoenix-owner wouldn’t allow killing within in his own ranks.

Potter looked at Nott like he was the most idiotic imbecile she’d ever met.

“Do you really think I care about listening to Dumbledore’s orders anymore?” the Basilisk-Slayer hissed. “And besides, you assume that I am going to kill all of you with my own hands. If your pathetic skills are any indication, the Durmstrang Champions are going to tear you apart the moment you step into the arena.”

This was the moment several enchanted torches chose to stop burning. At first, Draco believed it was the Exiled Queen’s power, but her semi-surprised expression told him it wasn’t the case. A jet of flame poured out of her wand, and the magical fire returned the corridor to its normal light illumination.

“Behave, Nott. Or there will be a second purge, after the Chamber of Secrets.”

“The Dark Lord will kill you,” Theodore whispered, words spluttering faster than he was thinking them.

“Then he can come and challenge me in person,” the retort came accompanied with a yawn. “Run to him and transmit the message for all I care. Malfoy, follow me. I have something to tell you.”

This was a very bad day, and Draco knew it had only gotten worse...

**4 September 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The sheer power inside the room was fantastic and always made proper Runic verifications incredibly difficult.

Yet in this instance, it had not been difficult finding the sabotage of the agent of the Exchequer.

When the glyphs were carved in perfect columns with always the same intervals between each symbol, one Rune being entirely erased was rather visible.

After that, it took only half a minute to discover which Rune had disappeared.

“Sowilo,” the centenarian Headmaster voiced before cursing privately the architect of this ruin to the most abject torments.

“Sowilo,” Archmage Ra confirmed, materialising some golden Runes in the air with a wave of his wand. “A warning and a mockery at the same time, should I be present to discover it.”

“The mockery I understand.” Albus Dumbledore wasn’t a specialist in the field of the glyphs and the wards tied to them, but he had nonetheless taken Ancient Runes until his NEWTs. They had been one of his weakest subjects – he had achieved an ‘O’ without any jury congratulations – but as far as reciting the properties of Eldar Futhark was needed, his memory wasn’t failing him. “But the warning?”

Sowilo was the Futhark Rune tied to Fate, the Sun, and the Light. Removing it was definitely spitting in the face of Ra and every other Light mage, much like Gellert had given the idea to the Nazi SS the idea to don it on their helmets.

“They could have used other columns,” the older mage admitted. “But without the Sowilo Rune on this one, the meaning once translated in Keteran can be loosely translated as ‘cloud of darkness rising in the east’.”

Ra banished his glyphs before scowling.

“For all his attempts to pretend he is a reasonable being, Osiris has always loved his little games of mirrors and smoke before unleashing his hordes.”

Since the Archmage was the one who had spent millennia fighting the horrors of the Lord of Darkness, Dumbledore was going to defer to him on that topic.

“Warning or not, how many time remains before the wards imprisoning Nidhögg break?”

“Three hundred and sixty-nine days exactly,” Ra replied sinisterly. “And as long as this hourglass is on the pillar, there is no hope of repairing the damage.”

Dumbledore eyed the little object stuck to the ward stone. It seemed totally insignificant, for it was exactly what Ra had said: a small hourglass, one which looked like it had been created traditionally, but still.

And yet once it was stuck to the Hogwarts’ Ward Stone, it had created a small area where time was literally frozen.

“They must have somehow found a way to imbue sand with the very Aspect of Time,” the Archmage who had founded the Trinity acknowledged. “It’s the only thing which makes sense...but how did they succeed, I have not the faintest idea. All our experiments involving the manipulation of time ended in disaster, and we terminated them centuries ago. There was no point wasting wizards and materials in such a foolish quest...”

Evidently, the Exchequer had not shared this point of view and succeeded where the Light had abandoned its projects.

“What can I do to help you break this...time-manipulating device?”

“You can say it, Albus, I am not going to scream,” the Archmage grimaced, “you can call it the time-turner of Osiris.”

“If you insist...”

The ancient Light wizard placed back his white hood upon his head before continuing.

“The better option for us, in many ways, would be to create an entirely new ward stone and by it, duplicate every effect Sal Al Zahr of the Silver Hills and Godric the Griffin-Rider incorporated into the wards of Hogwarts. Life and Justice, we have just found the most evident sabotage of the Exchequer agents. We don’t know what other surprises might await us here. The problem, alas, is that I’m not sure the Trinity and the Army of Light together can build a new Foundation Stone in three hundred and sixty-nine days. It would have been extremely difficult no matter the Age we found themselves to, the Founders of your school took seven years to complete the process...and they were geniuses with few equals.”

“But it would restore Hogwarts?”

“Yes,” Ra said before dashing cruelly his hopes. “Assuming we could convince a Champion of the Dark to participate into the activation ritual. We also require a Champion of Light who is not tied to Fate, but that is easier to arrange.”

“Why such a condition?”

“Because the one who went to be known as Rowena Ravenclaw was a deserter of Mordred’s army.”

The more times spent in presence of the core Ward Stone of the castle, the more he felt exhausted...and pessimistic, though the current conversation certainly accounted for that. The former Chief Warlock was tired, tired and sick of running around trying to extinguish the fires of Dark Wizards and nihilistic enemies.

“Are there other solutions?”

“Destroying the...time-turner of Osiris would be simpler and faster. But since the sabotage saturated in Light Magic the room, only a wizard or a witch immersed into the Dark would be able to overwhelm the defence...and if the Champion fails or the Dark Wizard betrays us, Nidhögg will be free in the next few seconds.”

Indeed, it was far too risky. One had only to look at the local spawn of Death or the Russian psychopath addicted to Chaos to know they couldn’t be trusted to safeguard the most sacred place of Hogwarts.

“I am going to need several days of assiduous work to have a better idea what must be done,” the Archmage told him. “If you have no objection, I will begin my ‘volunteer class’ by the second week of September.”

Albus Dumbledore wasn’t happy but nodded. If the wards failed, a monstrous dragon would be free to destroy the foundations of Hogwarts. Compared to that calamity, nothing, not even the European Magical Tournament, was a priority.

**9 September 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“I’m really jealous you have your own Potion tutor.”

“I’m sure you are, Hermione,” Alexandra replied not raising her eyes from a huge essay she was due to give back to Horace Slughorn in two days. “Is there something which prompted this great revelation?”

“Oh nothing much,” Morag said falling in the comfortable armchair she had just transfigured before improving it with several Cushioning Charms. “Just Snape being furious at Zacharias Smith and then venting his temper on everyone else present in the classroom.”

“It was horrible,” Nigel approved...and she couldn’t miss he was looking far less confident than he had been all summer.

Alexandra finished writing and closed the inkpot before meeting the expressions of lassitude, anger, or exasperation showed by her friends.

“I wish I could tell you Snape’s behaviour is exceptional, but well...” they had been in the same classroom as she was the last three years. And for Nigel and Hermione, it had been admittedly worse at first since they had begun in the ranks of the Gryffindors. “If it makes you feel better, Gryffindor lost fifty points when Leo Black melted another cauldron this morning.”

“It doesn’t make me feel better, no,” Nigel grumbled. “I just wish I could learn Potions with someone else.”

Alexandra gave him a pitying look.

“Since you’re going to stay at Hogwarts for a lot of months, I’m afraid I have no miracle solution for you, Nigel. I mean, I have this Potions tutor, and Morag and Hermione have already decided they will go to the classes of Potions organised by the Scuola Regina. But we’re the Champions of Ravenclaw, and our exceptions are guaranteed by the Tournament rules. Dumbledore isn’t going to spread it to the rest of the students.”

If the Headmaster bowed to the students’ pressure, there wouldn’t be many boys and girls - aside from those of House Slytherin - who would regularly visit the dungeons’ classroom.

“I know,” Nigel said sadly before managing to catch up a roll of parchment the Potter Heiress threw him. “What is this?”

“Something to cheer you up!”

“You recognise the *Loud Duck* as one of the newspapers to give you the right to interview you all year?” the brown-haired boy smiled for the first time after reading quickly the official document.

“Yep,” Alexandra answered, levitating a few quills as a training exercise, “don’t lose it, the document is official and was overseen by my guardian and other wise adult heads. I have another original in my vaults just in case and several copies sent to Tournament’s officials...but keep yours secure, most of the other newspapers aren’t going to see one, never mind see their names inscribed upon one.”

It went without saying that Alexandra would not give the *Daily Prophet* one. The green-eyed Champion would – in all likelihood – not be able to stop the rumour-mongers of the Prophet to be included in the multitude of journalists present in the Italian Peninsula, but she wasn’t going to make it easy for them to spread lies and falsehoods about her.

“Luna is going to be extremely happy,” Nigel replied while admiring the parchment.

“Speaking of happiness...”Morag tried hard not to laugh watching the apprentice journalist, “I think Binns almost noticed you were missing today.”

“Impossible,” the Ravenclaw witch protested with her hand placed above her heart. “Binns hasn’t noticed he is dead, what makes you think he will notice me when we are sure he didn’t even learn my name?”

One day she would use her prerogatives of Champion of Death to remove this sad joke from the castle. Alexandra had no problems with ghosts like the Bloody Baron, the Grey Lady, or the Fat Friar, but they were ghosts and amusing animations in the day-to-day life of Hogwarts. They weren’t important for their education. Binns, on the contrary, should have been fired long ago...or kept ‘teaching’ mice and empty classrooms, it wouldn’t be like he noticed.

“Definitely a class I was content to not return.”

“And one you didn’t have a tutor for, shame,” Morag teased her.

Alexandra gave her one of her best sarcastic expressions.

“If you could get away with it, you would already fail to attend half of the classes until October is over...”

“That’s simply not true!” Morag presented with a pouting face. “I would go to Charms and Herbology, I swear!”

“Somehow this doesn’t reassure me at all...” Hermione looked aghast.

“Don’t worry, oh academic overachiever and great librarian,” the Irish Heiress’ pious expression was maybe...one-third sincere? “I swear I will go to more classes than Fred and George together.”

Everyone burst into laughter, even Hermione.

**12 September 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

The moment Alexandra entered the new DADA classroom was when she knew it would be a miracle if she stayed one hour within its walls.

One of the reasons she had decided to give the class a chance was that her teacher for the two months ahead was Nymphadora Tonks. Cousin or not cousin, the young woman seemed sympathetic and funny. Moreover, she was a Junior Auror and an Apprentice to the more paranoiac ex-Auror of the British Isles. There was a good chance plenty of useful things could be learned from her.

Unfortunately, a glance informed her Professor Tonks wasn’t alone this morning in the classroom. The ‘Archmage of Light’ had also decided to grace them of his indomitable presence. Not that a glance was really necessary for her. The man’s aura – assuming he could still be considered a man after what he had done to his soul – was burning like a miniature sun, a sun of white fire like the Phoenix he most likely could transform himself into.

On her guard like she was, it took her three seconds to notice the magical device hidden behind a picture. And one more second to send a precise Diffindo against it.

“Miss Potter! What is the meaning of this?”

The aura struck her like a hammer. It was extremely painful, but Alexandra gritted her teeth and refused to give the Light mage the satisfaction of seeing her pain.

“If you try to sneak in any classroom a magical device to study my magical core without my personal content, there are going to be repercussions,” the Potter Heiress declared icily, noticing the man irises had turned white and gold. “I’m going to make my guardian and the other Independents Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot aware of this. This is the second time someone tried to spy our potential against our will in a DADA class, it’s time to take measures against it.”

In the privacy of her mind, Alexandra wondered if the Gryffindor-Slytherin class had been confronted with the same problem and not noticed. It was possible, she concluded, since Moody was one of the Headmaster friends and the two Houses weren’t exactly noted to be the most attentive students ever.

Outwards, she showed no sign of it as the enemy wizard closed the distance with her. It was a bit amusing to see that with her last growth spurt this summer, Ra – he was hired at Hogwarts under a fake name, of course – was forced to raise his head to look at her eye-to-eye.

“You should learn respect from your elders, *Champion* Potter.” The Light aura flared up again, and Alexandra wondered if the bastard was using it for intimidation and pressure, or he was just a jerk.

“And you, you should learn to respect the law, as imperfect as it,” Alexandra retorted. “But you never respected immemorial traditions and rules,” the Animagus form of Phoenix was far, far too powerful and broke the balance between the Light and the Dark. To achieve it, Ra had to have done a massive ritual, or a series of massive rituals. “I suppose it would be too much to hope you would respect minor details like those.”

“My actions were approved by...what are you doing?”

Alexandra had levitated an inkpot and her best quill at the same time.

“Well, I was preparing to write a transcript of the name of the person I should sue in front of a judge,” the Basilisk-Slayer gave him a splendid smile, despite the white fire assaulting her senses. “I’m betting ten Sickles you were about to say ‘Dumbledore’. But go ahead, prove me wrong...*Professor*.”

The Light enemy stayed silent for several seconds. So close, the resemblance to an Egyptian scribe was really unmistakeable...except scribes were never that dangerous. Ra was a monster. Despite her magical core having been strengthened to unprecedented levels, she honestly didn’t know if she would be able to give him a decent fight.

“You’re thinking it’s a game, don’t you, Black Witch?” The leader of the Light outside the British shores spoke after five more seconds. “Fortunately for you, this isn’t my class, so you will not lose any House points or receive a detention-“

“Two points, oh Archmage of Lost Empires,” the Champion of Morrigan said. If he wanted to play that game, who was she to oppose it? Besides, he was going to be sued within the next couple of hours. Depriving Leo Black of his pocket money had not been enough to change the minds and hearts, apparently. “No, four, actually. First, I don’t recognise your authority. I never will. Second, I am going to be on the continent for seven months, so if you think I care about the House Cup, you’re completely delusional. Third, it’s not a game. It has never been a game. And fourth...”

The last words were hissed so low she was sure no one save him and perhaps Morag next to her were able to perceive them for what they were.

“I have heard the song of Excalibur.”

And on this, the Hydra Animagus marched out for the door and the Hogwarts corridor beyond that. Hermione, Morag, Nigel, and the duo Susan-Hannah followed her less than five seconds later.

It seemed it was going to be self-study for everyone where DADA was concerned this year.

**15 September 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

When the announcement had been made that the Champions of Hogwarts needed to stay into the Great Hall for ‘Tournament duties’ all Thursday morning, Alexandra hadn’t jumped in joy. Unlike Longbottom and consorts, she was far more realistic. You didn’t need hours to reveal to an ICW delegation who you wanted as adult overseers for the Tournament.

The only thing which could require their presence for so long was the dreaded trial of paperwork.

And on this lovely morning, Alexandra hated being right.

Good news, she wasn’t alone. Hermione and Morag, along with Cho and Roger, had to be with her and read and write quantity of parchments.

Bad news, being the current Champion of House Ravenclaw, the raven-haired girl was ‘entitled’ easily three times the documentation the other Ravenclaws had to deal with.

And this came after two days where the Exiled and other people had had to sign a lot of parchments protesting against the actions of Ra in the DADA classroom, along with many students trying to outright abandon the course altogether – it wasn’t possible, of course, but given that Moody had showed the British Unforgivables in front of the Gryffindors and Slytherins, they were hardly the only ones to declare DADA was a madhouse.

Anyway, it was painful for her wrist and her arm, even internally transfiguring her arm to avoid the cramps.

Fortunately, it was once in a lifetime. Somehow, she didn’t think there would be a second inter-school Tournament in her school years.

And the pile of parchments was at last taken away. Turning her head right and left told her that of Hooper, Diggory, and Longbottom were far, far behind her in the completion of the bureaucratic duties.

“Do you understand this document, Champion Potter?” the ICW official asked in a bored tone, having done so fifty times in the last two hours. If he wasn’t shrouded in darkness, the man would have been bland and unremarkable. As it was, Alexandra knew he was likely the man the Exchequer had sent to keep an eye on the Hogwarts students...not that it was strictly necessary, with Horace Slughorn in the audience.

“I do,” yawning would hardly be disrespectful, but it had really, really been boring, even if the financial penalties for breaking the rules of the Tournament were massive. “Is there anything else?”

Her tone must have made clear she didn’t want any more paperwork, because the Luxembourgian chuckled.

“No, no! You have seen every article and piece of ruling that needed to be filled, signed, or checked. The last point I must speak with you is the list of tutors and adults you have authorised to contact you for education purposes once the Tournament has begun. First, your magical guardian, Lady Stella Zabini, correct?”

“Correct,” if her mother had been available, she would have been added to the list, but since she was apprenticed to the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina, it was impossible.

“Ms. Penelope Clearwater, Runes’ Assistant?”

“Yes.”

“Potions Master Horace Slughorn, Potions tutor?”

“Yes.”

“Lord Alan MacDougal, Law Expert?”

“Yes.” Alexandra had at first thought she would name a member of the Zabini household, but the Black Widow had been prompt to tell her she didn’t need one to be included: with she involved, the law experts were at her disposal whatever the hour of the day or the night. So she had chosen Morag’s father, to her friend delight. Not that she had done it solely for her: this gave the Champion of the Morrigan an excuse to visit Ireland when she wanted, and the Lord of House MacDougal had an entirely different perspective on events than Lady Stella Zabini.

“Professor Filius Flitwick, Head of House Ravenclaw, Hogwarts Professor, Charms Master, Duelling Expert?”

“Yes.” Evidently, her Head of House would rarely come to the Scuola Regina – save for the trials as a spectator – he had to teach the Charms’ classes. But he would be available if she Apparated back to Hogwarts, provided she gave a warning beforehand.

“Quidditch player Erin Moran?”

“Yes,” because given how crazy the Wizarding World was about Quidditch and everything flying on a broom, Alexandra wasn’t ready to bet against the idea of a broom race/obstacle course being made a trial. It would be extremely dangerous and spectacular. It would be a game where everyone started with equal chances – assuming they gave everyone’s the same brooms – and she had a feeling the Exchequer would love this apparent ‘equality’ stance.

“Everything is in order,” the Luxembourgian wizard nodded before giving him a polite smile. “After much deliberation, the ICW has deliberated and nominated the delegate of the sovereign nation of Magical Mysore to be your ICW liaison.”

Alexandra wasn’t really able to hide her surprise this time. Both Lady Zabini and Lord MacDougal had been in approval on this one: it was likely the ICW would choose a European delegate, given how...narrow-minded the British public could be when it came to foreigners.

“A...surprising choice,” Alexandra cleared her throat. “May I inquire about his identity, please? I am afraid I am not familiar with the ICW representatives of the nations existing beyond Persia.”

“Of course,” the older wizard replied genially, “the ICW representative of Mysore is His Exalted Highness the Maharaja Raja Wodegar the Tenth, the Tiger of Mysore.”

That answered the question asked...but not the most important. Why would such a prestigious Indian wizard be interested in meeting her, never mind spending several months in Italy for the sole purpose of playing ‘ICW liaison’?

Alexandra really hoped it wasn’t another Exchequer plot...oh who was she kidding, it had to be one. As famous as she was on British soil and certain circles, the Potter Heiress wasn’t so arrogant as to believe any Indian-born wizard or witch save the Patil twins knew who she was and what she had done.

“I accept the nomination,” not much else she could do, really. From the parchments she had read, Alexandra knew she could request another delegate...but only two replacements for the whole year were authorised. Important event or not, the ICW committees didn’t want to spend dozens of hours making delegate selections every month.

“Good!” The Luxembourgian wizard gave her a sincere smiling before shaking his head. “Now we only need to wait for your three fellow Champions to finish their own parts...”

Given how the proud standard-bearer of House Hufflepuff, the noble Cedric Diggory, was half-buried under a mountain of parchments, it was going to take a while.

**17 September 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

In the best of all worlds, the four Champions of Hogwarts would be united by unbreakable bonds and would have said something like ‘one for all and all for one’ before solemnly proclaiming their intention that one of them would win the European Magical Tournament’s trophy for Hogwarts.

Neville knew it wasn’t the best of all worlds.

The fact that in seventeen days this was the second time they had the four Champions in the same location for official Tournament business was particularly telling. And since the first occasion had been a mandatory meeting to fill the ICW and Venetian paperwork, there was really no reason to rejoice about it.

Geoffrey Hooper, Cedric Diggory, Cassius Warrington, and Alexandra Potter.

These were the three wizards and the witch who were going to enter the Tournament on Halloween 1994, sitting around the same table.

And they weren’t exactly at looking at each other with friendly expressions.

Neville wanted to...mend this. Both his senses as a new Champion and his own instincts of Quidditch Seeker told him a broken group of four like the one they were presenting was not going to win anything for Hogwarts.

But he was merely a substitute, and this wasn’t about him. He was metres away from the table, forced to stand between Davies and Chang, as the Headmaster advanced and watched each Champion with a severe expression.

Only an idiot would have missed the fact neither Warrington nor Potter looked at him in the eye, though Warrington went so far as to fix the wooden table for several seconds in order to avoid Professor Dumbledore’s gaze.

“I am rather disappointed,” the most powerful wizard of Britain began, “by your lack of unity and cooperation. I knew the multiple preliminaries had raised rivalries and enmities, but I hoped you four would be able to settle your differences and join your forces for what is going to be the most dangerous undertaking of your lives.”

Warrington coughed loudly, and Neville thought this was an attempt to not burst into giggles.

Cedric Diggory sighed.

Geoffrey looked depressed.

And the Champion of Death maintained a bored expression.

It was her who was the first to react the Headmaster’s sentences.

“With all the respect I have for you, Headmaster,” the expression should have felt particularly polite, but given who was speaking and the emotionless voice used...Neville knew it was more or less a disguised insult. “Why? Why should we cooperate with each other?”

There was a shadow of curiosity in the questioning. Weak, but still present.

“Champion Potter,” the Headmaster had decided to adopt the ICW name convention yesterday, “being selfish will not help your cause when you will face competent opposition like the one Durmstrang has selected for the European Magical Tournament.”

“But she has a point,” and to Neville’s despair it was Geoffrey who had intervened. “We are going to be graded individually, not collectively, during each Trial. And this is assuming we are together during the Trials, which my parents informed me was...improbable.”

“Is the lesser trophy of the winning school worth it anyway?” Warrington chose this moment to add a lot of venom on the debate. “I suppose the prize money is the same for the highest scorer and the top school, but with the first, we have our destiny in our hands, while the second will require enormous amount of luck. And we all know where the prestige is.”

It didn’t take a genius to know that Warrington wasn’t speaking of the school contest.

“Of course,” the older Slytherin sneered, and suddenly Neville regretted having simply bound and tied the Junior Death Eater during the Chamber of Secrets’ incident. “If we all make common cause, I’m volunteering for being the team leader of our group of Champions.”

“I would rather drink Basilisk venom than take orders from a Death Eater,” The green-eyed Black Witch had not raised her voice, but her eyes were speaking for her. Seen from where he was, the orbs were like emerald flames.

Cassius Warrington was surprised for a few seconds before finding the strength to chuckle.

“Careful, Potter. I thought your affairs with Black would have told you to be careful about baseless accusations.”

“I am always prudent when it is necessary, Warrington.” The Ravenclaw replied within a second. As far insinuations went, it was not subtle.

Merlin and Morgana, was Potter able to feel the Dark Marks Voldemort was carving on the arms of his servants?

If anything, Warrington suddenly didn’t look very comfortable before her implacable glare.

“Champion Potter, Champion Warrington, I expect you to remain civil towards each other.”

The Headmaster’s stern words went completely over their heads. It was extremely ironic, Neville was ready to acknowledge it. The witch and the wizard of the four Hogwarts Champions who had a Dark magical core were the two souls the least likely to tolerate each other’s presence.

Judging how Professor Dumbledore caressed his beard, he was certainly aware he was preaching a lost cause, especially with those two.

“Now for the news I wanted to inform you of: the final inspection of the Scuola Regina facilities has been completed to the ICW delegates’ satisfaction. This being done, the impartial international representatives are fully in agreement the Tournament can begin on schedule. We will therefore depart Hogwarts using the Hogwarts Express on the afternoon of October 29. The journey being quite long, we will sleep during the train travel and arrive on Sunday morning at the Scuola Regina. No delays will be tolerated upon boarding; please be there to wait for the Hogwarts Express when it will arrive at Hogsmeade Station. The living arrangements...”

**25 September 1994, Malfoy Manor, England**

An eternity ago, Malfoy Manor had been a safe haven for her. Now it felt more like a trap whose jaws were encircling her every time she turned her back on them.

Narcissa Malfoy was proud of the paintings, the carpets, the sculptures, and many other artworks accumulated and tastefully disposed in many rooms, all in order for the right people to recognise the superiority of House Malfoy.

But as beautiful as a painting of the seventeenth century was, it would not stop a trained wizard from burning the Manor down to its foundations. Only the Manor’s wards could serve as deterrent, and for all their complexity and lethality, Narcissa didn’t trust them fully.

If there was one enemy who had had the opportunity to examine these wards, it was the Dark Lord they had once sworn their allegiance to. And if the man had left flaws in them while he was at his most powerful, the Lords who had returned to his side would have no difficulty assaulting Malfoy Manor. Not with Lucius at Saint Mungo’s, and the House Elves as the only line of defence. Bellatrix regularly visited, but she had to travel everywhere, reassure their powerbase, and protect shops and wizards they were not going to be abandoned in the middle of the storm.

It was bad. But after more than a decade of utter silence, who could have anticipated the Dark Lord would be back?

It was only a couple of seconds later when she realised she had voiced her thoughts out loud. This wasn’t serious. At least the bad pun was avoided, as Sirius was dead.

“No one could have expected that.”

By the beard of Merlin, this wait was making her crazy-

“No one?”

Narcissa turned her head and drew her wand.

A dark-haired girl with green eyes threw her an unimpressed look before returning to admiring a rare painting of dragons and unicorns made by a master of the eighteenth century.

“Heiress Potter...I wasn’t...I mean, when you said, you wanted a meeting, I thought I would have to lower my wards to greet you.”

“Voldemort left holes in your wards. Any witch...or wizard...who can speak to snakes can exploit them.” The young witch declared. “I took the liberty to add a few Runic traps and erase these weaknesses after going through the crippled sections.”

Narcissa didn’t know what was the more ridiculous in this story: that a fourteen years-old witch could notice the work of one of the most dangerous Dark Lords in existence when professional Ward Masters were incapable of it, or that there were more people who were Parselmouths in this country.

But the Basilisk-Slayer was here, without her consent, and the wards had failed to give any warning.

“I...thank you for the favour. I suppose you will not mind if I hire some experts to check your work?”

“By all means,” the young witch continued to be absorbed by the many paintings of the living room. “They may be able to find something I missed. I’m just beginning my studies of Ancient Runes.”

Narcissa wanted to retort that if this was a beginner level, she was Morgana La Fay, but she held her tongue.

“As...important for me it was to discover the weaknesses of Malfoy Manor’s wards, I doubt you wanted to contact me for this issue.”

“No,” the girl who looked so much like Dorea Black – except the green eyes – acknowledged. “I wanted to contact you since this problematic night of the World Cup where I saved you and your House from extinction.”

“You-“

Narcissa’s mind went suddenly blank for one second. She tried to stay calm. She failed.

“How? You are...”

“Not old enough? Not experienced enough? Not skilled enough?”

“No... I mean...no, you evidently are, it’s...I am surprised.”

“Evidently.”

Narcissa managed not to gape, the sarcasm contained in the last word helping in that regard.

“Let’s make things clear,” the Potter Heiress spoke in a deadly tone. “I didn’t save you because I have an unlimited amount of love for your House. I know you were behind the whole Chamber of Secrets’ disaster during my second year, and I have not forgotten. Yet no woman deserves to be raped by these...these *beasts*. No one should have to go to a sport event and be traumatised by violence and atrocities.”

Narcissa nodded, and knew that in the green eyes, there was the same hatred her blue eyes expressed.

“You want the Dark Lord gone.”

“I do not consider him a Dark Lord, just a murderous terrorist,” her saviour and judge corrected, “but yes, I want him gone. All he brings is more chaos in an era which really doesn’t need more.”

“I agree, but it isn’t so simple. He truly came back from death.”

“No, he cheated Death of Her due, there’s a difference. But the payment will be collected in the end.” The smile on the teenager’s face was serene. It shouldn’t be, but it was. “As I said nights ago, in the end, no one escapes Death.”

**Author’s note**: If Voldemort was wise, he would likely flee Britain and cross the Atlantic to become a hermit somewhere in the New World. Alas, for him, he probably won’t...what a shame.

Next chapter will be the last one at Hogwarts for a while. Prepare for a few more surprises.

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