**Chapter 83**

**Art of Negotiations**

**7 October 1994, Zabini Manor, England**

Alexandra was used to hear stupid ideas coming from the Ministry’s direction, but this new move was so idiotic she needed her guardian to repeat it to be sure she had no hearing problem.

“Fudge did what?” The young Hydra Animagus asked.

“Our dear and beloved Minister Cornelius Fudge,” the Black Widow said in a false admonishing tone, “estimated a ‘clear and present danger to the security of Magical Britain’ currently exists. Between the threats of the ‘brave citizens Imperiused by the Death Eaters’, the Vampire threat, the high likelihood of a Goblin rebellion, and the Werewolf assassins, he felt he had no choice but to activate the Consul clause of Article 1.”

There were so many things wrong in this sentence that the Potter Heiress didn’t know where to start.

“Setting aside the reality there are no werewolves since they were all banished from the Isles after the last civil war...” when they had not died under torture in the Ministry’s cells or sent directly to Azkaban without a trial, that is, “the Consul clause has never been intended as a blank check from the Wizengamot to the Minister. I think even Binns mentioned the name of a few wizards who tried to use it like that and got killed by rampaging mobs for their troubles.”

Alexandra didn’t bother mentioning some of these crowds were half of the time including hundreds of goblins, the same species of warrior-bankers Fudge and his cohort of idiots were spending so much time antagonising.

“Yes, it is why among the Independents, we call it the ‘Dictator clause’.”

The Ravenclaw Champion wasn’t a major specialist of Ancient Roman history, but she knew why the Lords and Ladies had decided to choose this nickname.

“Appropriate,” the green-eyed Heiress commented. “I suppose that since the *Daily Prophet* has not sent a special edition yet, the chief imbecile survived the vote of no-confidence?”

“Well, no,” Stella Zabini smirked. “Thanks to the fact he had already survived one a few days ago, the law is very clear a second one couldn’t happen so shortly after...or at least that’s what the law-experts Fudge bribed to testify in his favour explained it to us.”

“I’m really surprised most of the Wizengamot let him get away with this.” You could say a lot of things about this assembly – ‘utterly corrupt’ were two words frequently used – but in general, they didn’t like anyone stamping on their privileges.

“The divisions between the Light and Dark Houses have never been greater,” her unofficial tutor in politics explained. “It’s near-certain Dumbledore himself harangued his supporters beforehand to make sure Fudge was fired, but a lot of Lords today will vote against him no matter what is at stake. I think House Malfoy intended to support the destitution of the Minister, but since the Light factions try to transform the subject of monetary compensations of the World Cup into a years-long bureaucratic nonsense...”

Alexandra feigned to not notice how Fingolfin and Atalanta were bickering about who would be the first to try to climb on her lap and receive long caresses.

“Fantastic. Trust the incompetent Minister to worsen the divisions of the Wizengamot in order to save his skin. For how long can his career survive anyway?”

“The theoretical answer is ‘as long as he can survive the successive votes of no-confidence’,” Stella allowed her to see her fangs of Lamia. “The practical answer...a second attempt to play with the ‘Consul clause’ has never succeeded. And honestly, after the disasters coming from everywhere, it is highly likely elections will have to be organised next summer. So Fudge has not won more than twelve months, and certainly less. Unless...”

The question was not asked openly, but Alexandra understood perfectly the insinuation. Did she want to use the Black Files here and now to break Fudge before he had the opportunity to sell more of his nonexistent loyalty to the Death Eaters or other criminal interests?

And the answer, she feared, was the same that she had given for Dumbledore’s case.

“No, it is too soon.”

The Britannian Gold Dragon managed to intimidate long enough her snowy owl to jump high and land on her, something he was fiercely reprimanded before having a single scale scratched or petted.

“I don’t disagree. I will remind you however that a weapon like the one you have in your hands is useless if it isn’t used, even if it is in secret negotiations.”

Alexandra curtly nodded.

“I am aware...do you think I could afford the consequences right now?” Once more she ignored the noises of outrage as Atalanta landed on Fingolfin’s back and presented her white feathers for petting.

“No, not right now.” Stella admitted. “The slaying of the Basilisks and the significant monetary recovery of House Potter hasn’t gone unnoticed, but you are far from a major player in the Wizengamot, and though the Independents like you, they will not throw themselves into a dangerous situation for your pretty eyes. Your age is not doing you any favour in that regard, of course. In addition to these drawbacks, the reality of Fudge and Dumbledore having finally broken whatever fragile accords existed between them means that weakening one will likely improve the situation of the other.”

Meaning getting rid of these two politicians at the same time was the best solution to remove the problems in one go. Unfortunately, it was certainly not going to work in Dumbledore’s case if she tried it right now. And even assuming it worked and ruined completely and totally his reputation, it may not be enough. Hogwarts wasn’t a Ministry department, it was closer to a feudal kingdom in its own right. As long as the Board of Governors failed to act unanimously, Dumbledore would stay as Headmaster. Failing to remove him and then being forced to stay at wand’s range of him for nine months wasn’t how Alexandra wanted to spend her year. The other Champions involved in the Tournament promised to be trouble enough.

“On the positive side, Fudge won’t be able to do much this year,” Stella continued. “Since his support has fallen under one out of ten seats in regular votes, the office is going to be increasingly powerless and irrelevant in today’s affairs. Directors Crouch and Scrimgeour have proven these last weeks that they had no issue passing their own priorities before his, and unless Fudge convinces the Unspeakables to pay in his stead for the World Cup reparations, it is highly likely his own vaults are going to suffer for the cause.”

“And how likely are the Unspeakables to accept paying for Fudge’s brilliant schemes?”

“What type of wizard or witch likes to be deprived of his – or her – hard-fought budget to pay for the mistakes of the others, Alexandra?”

“No one.”

“No one’, the Lady of Zabini Manor replied. “Now let’s discuss what you obtained in your negotiations with Lady Malfoy...”

**11 October 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“SILENCIO!”

For one second, Alexandra believed she had been successful...and then the large black toad – an inhabitant of the Black Lake brought in the abandoned classroom for experimental purposes – croaked in what sounded like a very mocking manner.

“I’m beginning to hate this damn amphibian.” Alexandra grumbled. “Stop laughing Susan.”

“I’m not laughing!” She could maybe, just maybe, have taken this seriously if the redhead Hufflepuff had not burst into giggles...again...shortly after.

“Silencio!”

If anything, this convinced the toad to croak louder...and Susan laughed more, not less.

“Maybe I can’t silence this toad, but I know how to inflate it and levitate it above your face, you know.”

“I tremble in fear, oh terrible Dark Lady.”

The Potter Heiress rolled her eyes and sighed loudly.

“If I really was a Dark Lady, one might believe it would stop the disrespectful behaviour of my minions,” Fred and George had even created a pastry bearing this name. The Champion of the Morrigan didn’t know where respect was supposed to be hiding, but it wasn’t in the Twin Terror’s future shop.

“Yes, oh mighty and megalomaniac Dark Lady.”

Alexandra stuck her tongue before casting a Sticking Charm on the toad. The perfidious animal had been trying to make an escape attempt while her attention was elsewhere.

“I love having you close for more reasons than I want to count, Susan, but is there a reason you felt like coming here...aside from kissing me or laughing at my attempts to cast the Silencing Charm?”

“Sorry,” the future Bones Lady smiled in complete contrast with what she was saying, “it’s just that seeing you struggle with Charms is...unusual.”

The Ravenclaw girl made a depreciating sound before taking a seat.

“We will see next year how long it takes you to become a mistress in this Charm, then. Unless you feel like one year early is perfect for you?”

The Silencing Charm was one of the most difficult parts of the fifth-year Charms teachings, and Alexandra could see why her Head of House had strongly recommended it before she returned to Hogwarts.

But it also remained a type of spell were control was paramount. The wand move was simple – a lower half-circle followed by a sharp slash downwards – the incantation hardly difficult to memorise ‘si-LEN-see-oh’, and focusing your will to make the animal in front of you shut up was a mental exercise even Crabbe or Goyle could master in a few minutes.

No, the problem was the influx of magic you had to pour into the spell. Silencio was not a Charm which tolerated the ‘approximately’. If you used too little power, like with a lot of Charms, nothing happened. Overpowering the spell, on the other hand, resulted in the animal – or whichever target you used – making absolutely strange deafening sounds and inflating like a balloon. The Ravenclaw had no doubt a large number of spying attempts and infiltrations in enemy territory had met a disastrous end because of a miscast Silencing Charm.

“No, no. I will cast it for the year of the OWLs, and not before.” Susan made a pitying expression. “I am trying to follow your...infernal rhythm of progression in Runes and DADA. Are you not ashamed to try to load your poor girlfriend with more homework?”

“Charms is one of the easiest courses proposed at Hogwarts,” Alexandra protested.

“Yes, as long as you do it on a normal speed of progression...which you aren’t, just in case you haven’t noticed.”

“I’ve noticed, believe me.” Alexandra bared her teeth. “I do exactly what is necessary to fight the trials coming.”

The ICW personnel had not revealed how many days the Champions would have to prepare between the Opening Ceremony and the First Task of the Tournament. Some narrow-minded fools – like Warrington – were betting they would avoid a fight to the death before November’s end. Being a realistic soul, the Potter Heiress didn’t think they would be that lucky.

“I know,” Susan said in a far more serious voice. “Do you think you will be ready?”

“My magic control is far better than it was a few weeks ago, and I have mastered several more elemental spells which will be really useful,” the Champion of the Morrigan said after a few seconds of deep thought. “I’ve more or less assimilated the entire fourth-year Potion curriculum with Slughorn, and I can do the useful stuff which is asked at the OWLS. I will be seriously disadvantaged in Arithmancy and Spell-Creation, and I can only hope Astronomy will play no part, because aside from the maths, I’ve abandoned the class.”

Professor Sinistra’s class – who looked she had caught some nasty disease at the beginning of last summer – may be interesting for some people interested in the movement of the Solar System’s planets and the effects of certain rituals, but for an international Tournament or for aggressive purposes...yep, it was useless.

“Don’t think I’m going to let you abandon your training once we arrive on Venetian territory.” Susan was the last Hufflepuff replacement, but this didn’t mean her chances to participate were null. Seven tasks. Five possible Champions for a single House. Her girlfriend could participate in three Trials if Diggory was eliminated in the first contest.

“You are not pushing Blaise Zabini that hard.”

“Blaise has...familial stuff to care about.” Lamia stuff, to be precise. And since Stella Zabini had told her this was taking priority... “I will-“

“Come on, it’s not a problem if you want to spend more time with me...”

This was the moment a burst of magic washed across the room. It was a large, beating pulse. It was giving a terrifying warm sensation. It was unexpected...and sufficient to unstick the toad. Bad luck for the amphibian, Alexandra reacted fast and cast the Sticking Charm again before the croaking animal could do more than one jump. By then, of course, the phenomenon had stopped like it had never existed.

“What was that?” asked Susan. “For a second, I felt...it was like...like-“

“The beating heart of a gigantic animal,” the Hydra Animagus whispered.

And the suddenness it had appeared...one might almost wonder if it had not been designed to merely to attract one’s attention. Like one sent an unofficial invitation.

**13 October 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

It was a good thing her sleep needs had decreased drastically in the last two years, or Alexandra would have already been thoroughly exhausted by two nights spent searching for the source of the magical disturbance which had contacted her.

Contrary to what the Weasley Twins pretended, no, it wasn’t easy searching for something inside Hogwarts, unless like the tricksters you had a Map indicating where your goal was. In their generosity, Fred had proposed she borrowed it for a modest period of time – and less than modest fee – but the Champion had politely declined.

This map was useful, but it wasn’t what she needed. The improvised replication of ward schemes by the Marauders may give someone possessing the map the ability to avoid the Prefects and the patrolling Professors, but Alexandra had perfect vision and senses which allowed her to sense someone at several hundred metres. Add the Invisibility Cloak she had donned tonight, and the Potter Heiress felt confident few people could track or ambush her.

It wouldn’t do to become overconfident, evidently. Dumbledore and Ra were in the same castle as she, and these two had forgotten more about magic than what she had learned in her few years of education in the magical world.

But why would they be on alert for her? Except the moments she Apparated to Zabini Manor or to see the Dreadnought project, Alexandra made a point about ‘respecting’ the rules, and before the last nights, she didn’t leave the Ravenclaw Common Room after curfew. So as long as these nightly ventures stayed limited, the Light should stay as ignorant as they were bigoted.

Which left her with a big problem.

Namely tracking the source of a certain magical disturbance.

Some haughty Gryffindors would no doubt sniff and tell it was a piece of cake, but no, it really wasn’t. Hogwarts was a school-castle soaked in magic, some of it was ancient, while other phenomena were the result of failed spells in the classes of yesterday. The armours were magical. The paintings were magical. The students, obviously, were magical. In fact, the latter point was because she was doing this exploration at night, and not just for secrecy’s sake; during the day, feeling anything subtle would have been utterly impossible.

The Trophy Room having proved nothing but a waste of time, she was forced to take some stairs as a source of noise was heard on the floor she was upon: none other than Peeves, infamous poltergeist, no doubt planning something mischievous for tomorrow.

The echo of the pulse was heard again. This time Alexandra was more or less capable to point a vague direction.

“The Library? Well, well. Not exactly the location which first came to mind.” The dungeons had been where her first explorations had led to, but apart from an impressive number of animated snakes she could speak to, there was nothing of note.

More precautions had to be taken as she approached the door leading to the greatest concentration of books. Before last year, the Ravenclaw hadn’t known it, but there was a basic ward alerting a Professor someone had opened the main door of the library...no wonder it was never locked.

The solution to this minor obstacle was rather simple, however. The second door – the one reserved for Madam Pince - had no such wards to detect students. It was locked, but it wasn’t going to stop her.

“Eihwaz,” the green-eyed witch whispered, tracing the distorted ‘S’ rune in the air, waiting before it materialised fully before mentally pushing the glyph into the keyhole. A second later, the door was unlocked. Professor Babbling would have at least been forced to give her an ‘E’ for this.

For some reason Alexandra wasn’t able to smile as she walked past rows upon the countless rows of books of the Hogwarts Library. Maybe it was the darkness. For all the nocturnal vision granted to her, the night was not fully her domain, especially with no candle or torch to illuminate the path taken.

And there were a lot of sources of magic in the library, far from than she had thought possible. Had the disturbance reawakened ancient wards, or were the resonances more powerful at night by design?

After a few false trails, the Champion of the Morrigan found a row of shelves which seemed promising. The magical heartbeat was getting more powerful, more insistent.

Then she began to look at the titles of the books placed there, and it was hard to not chuckle. She wasn’t that successful in containing her hilarity, to be honest.

“How to raise your duck? Seriously?” No wonder she had never felt the need to come to this section of the library...or seen many students walk in this direction either. The shelves had a distressing quantity of animal-raising publications...and none of them would be useful for any students, including those who took Care of Magical Creatures.

But it was kind of the point. So close to the left wall that it almost touched it, the last row had a series of massive and extremely dusty books upon it. It was like even the House Elves had forgotten it existed in the first place...or maybe they couldn’t see it. One of the tomes was radiating magic to her senses. Its title was *Fire Unseen*.

“Not a subtle riddle, that one,” though it didn’t really need to be, if no one remembered why it was here in the first place. “All right.”

Alexandra took a deep breath and mentally prepared her words. She had a feeling the ‘basic’ evocation wasn’t going to cut it for this one.

“By the power of the sunset and the dawn, the fires of battle and the home, the torch which will be known for every being as the flame, show me where your Prince remains! KAUNAN!”

The final point of the evocation was spoken far louder than she wanted, but it was not really her decision...it was like magic itself had poured more strength in her voice than needed to be.

And in a slow rumbling, a passage big enough for two men opened in the wall on her left.

“That’s a new secret passage discovered all right. Morag is going to owe me a Galleon, and Hermione will be frustrated it is in the library of all places.”

The Hydra Animagus waited for a full minute, but there was no alarms, no sign of Professors incoming. The castle was as sleepy as it had been minutes ago.

Alexandra entered the secret passage. It was instantly a different atmosphere. Not the odour of something which had been left to rot...not it was well-ventilated, but the air was cold, incredibly cold. The passage soon became only large enough for one person, and the walls were of pale white stone which gave her a lot of unease. Someone had used Light spells to shape and build this part of the castle, the Potter Heiress was ready to bet half of one of her vaults on it.

The descent continued for a long, long time. There were no stairs, and there was no magic save the one imbued long ago in the stones. There were no inscriptions, no runes, no work to indicate who the architects were or why the knowledge had been lost centuries ago.

It took her close to twenty minutes, but the progression stopped. The location which offered itself to her eyes was...curious. It was a room as big as the entrance of a Common Room, and the common points didn’t stop here: it had its own chimney, the wood logs – perfectly preserved by a sort of enchantment, she checked. There were four seats, one bearing the colours of a Hogwarts House. There was a large round table, as austere as it looked uncomfortable. A sort of stone arch opened on nothing. Exits? Except the corridor she had arrived from, there was no trace of them. There was a library too.

Being a spiritual descendant of Ravenclaw, the last Potter felt compelled to open a few of the books after casting spells to make sure there was no trap or Curse on them. Her hands shook because past the heavy leather protection of the first work she opened, the symbol of a dragon was there to greet her.

The text was gibberish; it looked like it was written in Old English, and not by a talented writer, but one name drawn in haste attracted her curiosity at the bottom of the page: Ygraine. It was a treatise of magic, maybe Arithmancy given how many times the number seven and various diagrams were seen again and again.

Ygraine. If this book had been written before the birth of Morgana La Fay, this would make it more than one thousand and five hundred years old...what kind of preservation spells the wizards and witches of old were able to cast that the book was as brand as new today in her hands? Absently, she noticed there was a missing page: where the seventy-seventh should have been, someone had used a badly underpowered Cutting Charm. Unless the objective had been to mutilate the book. If so, it was a success. But why not burn the book altogether then?

The room being warmer than the long corridor which was the only way to get to his library, Alexandra removed both Invisibility Cloak and conventional cloak to place them on the old-fashioned wooden chairs – not very comfortable those ones – and seized another book. This one she recognised. Runes. Dozens upon dozens of Runes, some of which familiar, some absolutely not. The explications were in Old English too, but she felt that-

The temperature raised again, and Alexandra noticed that some flames were burning in the chimney.

“What the hell?”

It wasn’t the only thing which was wrong. What she had taken as a simple stone arch was shivering, like a gate had been opened under it to another place. Alexandra raised her hand, ready for anything. One of the times she had seen something close to this, the Summon had devastated Brise-Roc.

Flames danced around the arch, and for three seconds a miniature inferno opened, though it never escaped to propagate across the room. And then the arch vanished, and Alexandra could see...somewhere else.

“I hate being right...”

Her sight could now glance at an extremely large cavern. A cavern more the size of a city, but who was caring about that? It was something that could have only been built with magic, given that no pillars were in sight.

On the other hand, it was kind of necessary. Otherwise the absolutely gigantic dragon contained in it wouldn’t have destroyed them in short order.

Though dragon seemed a bit...limited to describe the magical creature. Alexandra taught an adorable golden dragon. She had seen many adult dragons now, for real. The Champion of Ravenclaw had real many, many books about the draconic species for the Tournament. She had found information how to trick them, what were their strengths and their weaknesses.

This...that...that was no dragon. This was the small cousin of Ancalagon the Black.

Black of scales, black from the large horn on its muzzle to the edge of its endless tail. The numerous spikes – the smallest of which could have been a two-handed sword – were tarnished silver. Black eyelids opened to reveal shining eyes the colour of the blood.

Wings of obsidian unfurled partially, revealing it was largely bigger than the Summon the Exchequer had used to wipe out a fortress worth of goblins.

This...this was no dragon. It was a leviathan of darkness, an antediluvian monster, the last apex predator of a forgotten age. It was a mountain which could spit fire. It was a source of magic so great that even being far from it provoked an intense pressure on her new Occlumency shields.

The magical juggernaut stretched in all directions before looking directly at her. His red eyes giving her the disagreeable impression she was a mere rabbit in the shadow of a carnivorous tyrant.

“**Salutations, Champion of the Morrigan**.” Each word was akin to an avalanche, the roar of a storm, the fury of a thousand battles.

“Salutations, Nidhögg, First and Last of the Elder Dragons. You wished to speak to me?”

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The Headmaster of Hogwarts had been soundly sleeping when the alarm siren woke him up. Albus Dumbledore had begun drinking Alchemical brews he had invented decades ago to deal with the pains associated with old age, but to both his relief and his mild exasperation, the Defeater of Grindelwald had long realised even the most powerful elixir was not as good as a good night of sleep when it came to deal with normal tiredness and the other symptoms of exhaustion.

This didn’t mean he couldn’t wake up very quickly as his mind connected the sound of the alarm to the danger it was supposed to prevent from happening. Fortunately for him, this particular sound had been tested less than a month ago.

“The dragon is trying to communicate with the outside.”

The leader of the Alliance had told him it was a slim possibility, but Albus had remained confident it was extremely unlikely. After all, the only way to speak to the animal powering the Ward Stone of the case was by accessing the room of the Ward Stone itself, and new measures had been erected to ensure no saboteur had a second opportunity to do more damage than had already been done.

Yet the fact the alarm was continuing its unpleasant melody was evidence enough he had been wrong.

And as he transfigured his night clothes into something far more suited for a duel and ran outside his bedroom, Dumbledore felt a very unpleasant tinge of worry in his head. Ra could insist all he wanted about the ‘beast’ being a bloodthirsty monster, a draconic avatar of devastation and apocalypse, a catastrophe which would wreck everything on its path now if unleashed upon the world...but the Black Dragon could speak.

Therefore it could think, reason like a human being, and be considered very intelligent.

In turn, if the Black Dragon tried to communicate with the outside, it meant there was *someone* able to communicate back.

This was a disaster. The Founders, for excellent reasons, had always kept secret the fact the Ward Stone was functioning by keeping a dragon prisoner. They had known from the very start families might refuse to send their children to this school if they were guaranteed to be at the mercy of a gigantic dragon should the Ward Stone break.

Running down the stairs out of his office and walking through the corridor as the gargoyle let him pass with a yawn, the headmaster heard hurried steps and saw the familiar white-robed figure of Ra run towards him.

“Damn the beast,” the Archmage hissed for sole greeting.

“Will you be able to prevent a second incident?” Albus asked as they approached a second gargoyle after a short walk. This one wasn’t leading to his office, though. It was the main access to the Ward Stone’s room. This wasn’t the only difference with the stone guardian of his office, of course. For this one, you needed to know the combination of Runes on the gargoyle’s head in addition to the secret password, and only the Headmaster of Hogwarts’ magical signature speaking was considered a valid try.

It was the first layer of defences...and it was supposed to be flawless. Until a Dark Imposter-Metamorphmagus somehow managed to copy his magical signature by forbidden magics of the foulest sorts.

“No signs of intrusion,” Dumbledore commented as they ran to the second layer of protections.

“I expect we won’t find any,” his interlocutor replied grimly in an accented English. “It is only a theory, but I think the beast is using the weakness in the Ward Stone to signal its presence by way of certain ancient conduits the Founders of Hogwarts used to build this castle.”

“Whoever the dragon is speaking to won’t be by the Ward Stone, then,” the former Chief Warlock caressed once his silver beard before incanting a complex spell which would deactivate for one hour the third layer of protections blocking their way.

“No,” Ra acknowledged. “But we will need the Ward Stone to track her.”

“Her?”

The older wizard – something Albus was less and less used to not be now that he was past his first century – gave an expression which could have been a smile if it wasn’t so threatening.

“Come on, Albus. Let’s dispense with the pretences, shall we? Mordred was the only witch which could really exert some influence on this creature. The Light Powers only know how she did it, but there was no doubt the rest of her court’s wizards were not tolerated by the beast. Since we have a girl who is Mordred reborn in looks and a Champion of Death in this very castle, I don’t think it is much of an exaggeration to know who is speaking to whom right now.”

“Should we not run to the Ravenclaw Tower, in this case?”

“No,” Ra replied coldly. “I sincerely doubt the Founders would risk placing a magical conduit anywhere near the children’s bed. They were good men and women, not idiots. And even if we stop the Black Witch now, we have to discover how the dragon did it and where his communication pathway goes. It won’t do anything good if we arrest the culprit only to let the beast free to contact someone else.”

“Especially if we can’t arrest the culprit,” Dumbledore said as one twirl of the Elder Wand deactivated a series of trap-wards.

“Dumbledore you can’t seriously consider-“

“Whoever speaks with the dragon, it is certainly a student.” The Headmaster saw no reason why the dragon would try to signal his presence to one of the teachers. “I certainly won’t be able to expel him or her, not without letting him or her be interrogated by the Board of Governors.”

“The Army of Light will be happy to make the problem disappear.”

Dumbledore felt absolutely no amusement as he turned towards the other Light wizard.

“No. And not just because if a student disappears from Hogwarts in the middle of the night, my tenure as Headmaster will be counted in days.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Albus,” Ra countered. “If the Black Witch is able to speak with the beast, she can cause a lot of damage to the cause!”

“And if I arrive to the Scuola Regina with one missing Champion with rumours I have a hand in the disappearance, I will be lucky to not be arrested and dragged to Geneva in chains.” The Headmaster of Hogwarts sighed. “Let’s try to first assess the damage before we decide what must be done.”

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“Salutations, Nidhögg, First and Last of the Elder Dragons. You wished to speak to me?”

A small cascade of fire escaped the maw of the black dragon, answering from the start if it was capable of breathing fire.

“**I did, yes**.” The blood-red eyes stared at her, and the voice gained a more...human-like type, though the magic behind it was unable to remove all the reptilian undertones. “**Your greeting, while appreciated, is not correct. I was not the first of the dragons. And there are no...Elder Dragons in this world. All dragons who live sufficiently long can reach my august size**.”

“And speak modern English despite being imprisoned for over fifteen hundred years?” This was something she was very curious about.

The black wings moved, and the tail struck the barriers of the prison.

“**I am cut off from the world**,” the dragon hissed, “**but though this damned Ward Stone drains some of my strength, I can often hear the whispers of those speaking too close in magic. And I am very talented with languages**.”

A reminder if there was one to not underestimate the flame-breathing reptile. Though Alexandra wouldn’t have been likely to do so. For the first time she had really merged with her Hydra inner animal, Alexandra felt really wary. It was not every day she met a magical opponent bigger and taller than her Lernaean transformation.

Against a ‘normal’ dragon, the Champion of the Morrigan felt she could take animal form and triumph without too much trouble. Her regeneration capabilities were far superior to any draconic species...except the fact Nidhögg was not a Hebridean Black or a Hungarian Horntail. The former had not these silver spikes, the horn among everything else. The latter were too bulky and weren’t built for speed and quick acceleration like the prisoner of Hogwarts was.

“I will keep it in mind.”

“**Do so**.” The dragon recommended. “**Now why I invited you here, for we don’t have much time to speak before the Light jailors came with their boots of righteousness and arrogance. I want to be free**.”

“As does everyone imprisoned, I imagine.” Alexandra nodded. “I’m still surprised your first choice is me. I mean, I suspect the Exchequer is behind the sabotage of the Ward Stone. And given your ties to Morgane and Mordred...”

“**I never bowed to Morgane Rys’Ygraine Avalon while she was breathing**,” Nidhögg sniffed so haughtily that Alexandra had the urge to chuckle. “**She’s dead, isn’t she**?”

“No, she was transformed into a vampire.”

The black dragon appeared to not be very surprised by this revelation.

“**I suppose that struck by an abomination like Excalibur, she would find a way to continue her vengeance**.” Nidhögg changed his position, allowing her to reveal several massive scars on his belly and flanks. It had to be Excalibur’s work...Dark Powers, the blade of Arthur had failed to pierce his scales? “**And no, I don’t trust the Exchequer. Osiris and his lieutenants’ goals have rarely aligned with mine. I leave them to their vengeance against the Light. As for Mordred, I followed her because she was paying me**.”

Okay, of all the reasons she had expected, Alexandra hadn’t thought of that one.

“Err...you are a mercenary, Nidhögg?”

“**Of course, I am**!” The black dragon proclaimed. “**Why would I take the risk of intervening in the affairs of humans otherwise? For the love of the chivalry code? Because I care about who sits on a ridiculous throne or who dons a crown of copper? No, I serve only myself, and my allegiance goes to my employer as long as he or she pays me. Before Myrddin and his band of fanatics came to power, I was the greatest power of the Isles thanks to my careful investments! Kings and Wizards came to barter for hours of my wisdom and my might! Several Princes of the continent were trembling at the mere sight of my agents coming to collect the loan repayments**!”

Alexandra had not found any real motives for the sheer hatred the Light must have felt for the dragons, no matter what books she opened. But there had to be one. One didn’t condemn an entire race to cultural annihilation just because they might be a problem for the Statute.

But if several dragons had been as influential as Nidhögg bragged and anti-Statute to boot, of course Ra and his lackeys mustn’t have liked their power and the reach their wealth gave them.

“And what did Mordred promised you to make you risk everything on the battlefield of Camlann?”

“**A dukedom and the title of Grand Constable of her realm**.” Claws which were as tall as herself scratched the floor or the prison. “**But by the time Camlann happened, fighting was also for survival. The Light had begun its crusade, and sacked many of my greatest collections. The books of this library next you are some of the last existing samples, I suspect. The rest was no doubt dispersed or destroyed**.”

A few curses were hissed afterwards, some of which were quite...imaginative.

“**But back to the issue of my continued imprisonment**.” Nidhögg grumbled. “**I smell the odour of a dragon upon you and you are in many ways the successor of Mordred. That makes you the logical interlocutor having an interest in my freedom**.”

“I am not Mordred reborn.” Alexandra protested, though there wasn’t much fire behind her words.

“**No, you’re not**,” Nidhögg agreed...before amending his thought, “**Mordred would have been unable to kill two Basilisks at twelve or thirteen, Clarent in hand or no. People have forgotten I presume, but before she was crowned, it was her mother’s wizards who fought all her battles. It was only after Arthur began his massacres against the mermen that she really took the battlefield on her own...with me. Since you fight your own battles yourself, that makes you superior to Mordred in my opinion**.”

“Thank you...I guess.” The eyes of the Basilisk-Slayer narrowed. “But since you’ve established your prices are on the order of a king’s ransom and that your loyalty will go to the highest bidder, I must ask the real question: assuming it is in my power, why would I take the risk of freeing you? I hate people who imprison other beings into cages, be it for a minute or for a century. I loathe the existence of the prison-fortress of Azkaban. I think the Founders were completely amoral to condemn you to such a fate. But the fact remains your liberation will most likely destroy Hogwarts, and certainly force me to fight a significant number of wizards and witches in the process too.”

 Draconic laughter echoed before the maw closed again.

“**You called me a mercenary, and this is what I am**.” Nidhögg said without a trace of apology in his voice or in his blood-red eyes. “**But as I accumulated gold, gemstones, artefacts, I also gathered books and secrets. You can take the library next to you as payment to accept my invitation. And as the Powers are my witness, I came by accident or by design upon several of great interest to anyone in your situation. It is no coincidence Ra ran here once the Ward Stone was sabotaged by the face-usurper**.”

Now, she was interested, very interested. Especially as one recent letter of her mother had insisted that while the white phoenix met during the last Beltane night would be unable to report anything of what had really happened, the essence of the bird itself was not dead.

In the end, no one knew how to kill Phoenixes, or if one did, no one had ever come forwards to tell it. It was undoubtedly why Myrddin was imprisoned in the Fortress of Air and not dead. Plenty of people had tried to end the birds, but no one ever reported a success.

At least until now. If the black dragon was really able to back his hints with a true solution...

“You have my attention, Nidhögg. I am willing to listen to you if you have an escape plan in mind.”

The flame-breathing reptile had one, but by this point, it was the contrary which would have been surprising...

\*\*\*\*

They arrived before the Ward Stone just in time to see a spark of flame-like magic flicker and die. If he had been in a better mood, Albus would have appreciated the irony of the very defences supposed to protect it having made the timing possible. In this instance, he really didn’t enjoy it at all.

He could reassure himself he reacted better than Ra, at least. The more time he spent with the Archmage, the more he realised the temper of the Egyptian-born wizard was formidable, and as much a political weapon as a sign of his unbreakable determination to defeat the darkness.

The curses hurled in a language he had never heard before were extremely violent, and before the Headmaster could ask what his ally intended, a series of glyphs were touched on one of the walls.

The air shivered. Flames coalesced, and within seconds, the two old Light wizards weren’t contemplating the Ward Stone or the Rune-covered walls, but a gigantic cavern and its monstrous prisoner.

Albus had warned, but he felt nonetheless his heart beat faster and terror grip his old bones as he watched the red-eyed dragon returning their stare. As part of his project to organise the Tri-Wizard Tournament at Hogwarts, the former ICW Supreme Mugwump had visited several preserves where highly dangerous species were preserved from extinction.

The dragons he had seen there or before in his younger years were just tiny dwarves compared to the horned black colossus. And no big imagination was necessary to notice the sheer amount of intelligence lurking in these red eyes. Blood eyes much like Tom Riddle had sprouted. Were his enemies all destined to have these crimson irises?

“What have you done, beast?”

The maw which opened gave an excellent view of the superb dentition of the dragon.

“**Well, well, well...if it isn’t the Great Traitor himself...**” The yawn was absolutely feigned, and the mockery implicit. “**And you brought the Headmaster too. Nice attention, I love watching my enemies before-**“

“Be silent, beast!”

The maw didn’t slap shut, though it closed slightly.

“**So impolite**.” The Black Dragon complained. “**But then I shouldn’t be surprised. If your mother had taught you and your dark brother a small amount of manners and politeness, the world would be a far better place today. Of course, if she had drowned you in the Nile in the next minutes after your birth, the world would be a paradise and-**“

Ra uttered a short incantation, and the cavern distorted after a flash, and Nidhögg made a small grunt of discomfort...before smiling more widely as a fissure which hadn’t been there before him was enlarged with a single claw.

“**Careful now, Archmage**,” the flame-breathing reptile continued his mockery. “**My prison isn’t what it once was. What a shame it would be if a wall or two collapsed...a shame for you, that is**.”

Dumbledore had to give the creature a point. If the prison failed...setting aside the destructive consequences for Hogwarts, there was little chance to fight their way out against such an enemy. Albus considered himself – with the scars and the diploma to prove it – a Master of Transfiguration, a senior Alchemist, a duellist with no obvious weakness, and a well-proficient Warlock in the Light Arts.

He had never used a spell which could give such a monster pause. Trying to transfigure the environment to stall its aggressiveness would be his first reflex, but how in the name of Merlin did you transfigure so much in so little time?

“When everything will be repaired, expect your next prison to not be so spacious, beast!”

“**Now, now...you and I both know there will be no second prison, Archmage**.” The Black Dragon’s tone gained in condescension. “**Your little trick of before would have seriously inconvenienced me two thousand years ago...now I barely felt it. Tell me Ra...**” the fangs were so close it became possible to count them, “**I know I haven’t become more powerful, the last of the lackeys you sent at Camlann ensured that. So I ask the question: how deep was the fall while I was imprisoned**?”

“I am still in my prime, beast! And once I’ve discovered how you contacted your accomplice, this way to communicated outside will be removed forever!” The Archmage of Light stormed out in fury out of the Ward Stone’s room.

“**And on this wise speech the White Phoenix leaves**,” was the sarcastic comment made by the XXXXXX-class magical creature. “**He has not changed at all since our last encounter**.”

“Riling up is all you have, herald of malfeasance.”

“**For now**,” his interlocutor replied. “**And I find incredibly amusing you call me ‘herald of malfeasance’ when you work with Ra**.”

“You burned cities and killed uncountable lives. You have no right to judge.”

“**Babylon. Three hundred and twenty-three before the birth of the Pretender-Saviour**.”

Albus didn’t understand the sudden shift in the conversation.

“What are you trying to say?” The silver-bearded wizard asked the Black Dragon.

“**Oh you didn’t know? Ra didn’t like his former Apprentice had turned megalomaniac and entered negotiations with Osiris to gain immortality...even if it meant embracing the darkness. He tried a lot of things, but when he realised the Macedonian-Persian troops were staying loyal, he released one of the most lethal plagues in human history. It killed his former Apprentice...along with hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children. But Ra was victorious. I suppose it’s all that mattered in the end, right?**”

“You lie.” The Archmage had been right to warn him of the lies spread by this infernal creature. “Next time make your claims a bit more believable.”

Nidhögg laughed, a noise so loud it was almost an earthquake in its own right. The floor of the room definitely trembled as embers of flame were spread around.

“**Osiris and his lieutenants must have a lot of fun manipulating your coven of fools**.” The Black Dragon mocked him again. Albus ignored him, and went on to press the shining glyph which would sever the communicating arch of flames. “**Oh and Headmaster? The name of the Apprentice was Alexander. And though he died by the weapon of his old master, his last loyal soldiers escaped in the night carrying his newborn legitimate child. A green-eyed girl. A magical child pledged to the Dark. Isn’t irony delicious?**”

Albus Dumbledore froze.

“**Born with the eyes of death, dark will be her first breath**.” The ancient reptile recited words which were forbidden to utter in most nations. “**She is the Heiress of the Forgotten. She is the Agony of this Magical Era. Six Kings, Six Crowns. Six Swords. One by one, the Fall begins. Come Day of Battle, O Angel of Death. Cast thy lightning and reign over the ashes**.”

“This will not happen. The Prophecy can be return to dormancy like it was after the Light’s victory at Camlann.”

“**No one won at Camlann, fool. But don’t worry, you will have soon the opportunity to verify it with your own eyes. Ragnarok is coming**.”

**19 October 1994, ‘Dreadnought Base’, Scotland**

“I’m not sure this perfectly charming black dragon was telling you the whole truth. About him being a perfectly normal dragon, that is.”

Alexandra snorted.

“It is likely Nidhögg wasn’t fully truthful, yes.” The Hydra Animagus watched the warships being repaired and improved below her. “If he was as influential as he pretended, a regimen of the correct Potions alone would be able to boost his growth and his reflexes, not to mention his magical strength. He may have siphoned the power of several important artefacts.”

“This doesn’t seem to faze you.” Morag noted.

A chuckle escaped the lips of the Potter Heiress.

“Morag, this dragon survived Excalibur. And unlike the Queen of the Exchequer, he didn’t become an undead to save his life. Not to mention someone, certainly Arthur, really did his best to kill him with this weapon, if the scars I saw weren’t caused by something else. I think we can safely conclude this wasn’t exactly chance which led to Nidhögg surviving Camlann.”

Hermione coughed, doing her best to not look too surprised by the sum of goblin and manpower devoted to the Dreadnoughts and the rest of the magical assets brought here. Then again, it was the first time she came here.

“That’s really interesting, Alex, but what are you going to do? Elder Dragon or average dragon dosed on Growing Potions, Nidhögg represents a threat you won’t be able to control if he turns against us. If he isn’t entirely truthful about the things you were mentioning, why wouldn’t he lie about his relationships with the Exchequer?”

Morag answered faster than she could.

“Because he has no reason to? And because facts support his version of events? Honestly, if he was truly a true supporter of the Dark Wizards, they would have put a hell more effort in freeing him these last fifteen hundred years. And yet, when they did try, they just bothered slightly sabotaging the Ward Stone, not destroying the whole edifice. I don’t know what you think, but for me, it looks this whole scheme is more about causing problems to Dumbledore and his ‘allies’, not necessarily gaining another ally.”

Alexandra stayed silent, watching the dark blue of the water waiting northwards.

“They may be a second bow to their ambitions,” the green-eyed Champion admitted after a second. “The Queen couldn’t possibly ignore my resemblance to her fallen daughter, and Nidhögg served as Mordred’s – well-paid – mercenary. Add to that the fact there aren’t a whole lot of wizards and witches sensitive enough to magic to locate magical disturbances and not to run immediately to Dumbledore...”

“You are saying...” Hermione played with her wand without looking a single second at it. “They manipulated Nidhögg into contacting you.”

Morag nodded vigorously.

“It makes sense. Who was a giant dragon male going to summon to do his bidding? Dumbledore? The old wizard certainly knew of his existence since he became the Headmaster. A Gryffindor? They would have run back to the Defeater of Grindelwald the moment they saw the black scales.”

“In the unlikely case they would have managed to solve the enigma,” the black-haired Ravenclaw pointed out. “They aren’t that many proud Lions who are taking Ancient Runes.”

And even fewer who were as skilled as she was in the field of Runic-casting.

“It’s still taking an enormous risk,” Hermione warned. “If we really go along with such a...crazy plan, there won’t be any return possible. The Ministry and the Wizengamot won’t rest in peace until we’re imprisoned at Azkaban or dead.”

“Don’t forget the various organisations of Light fanatics,” Alexandra began with a large smile, “the ICW too, since I suppose releasing a dragon bigger than any strategic bomber into the nature must count as a first-tier Statute of Secrecy’s violation. The non-magical government will certainly try to crucify us, literally or metaphorically, since I don’t think there would be very content with having the equivalent of a magical nuke in their backyard.”

Technically the Champion of the Morrigan supposed she counted as one, but as long as she didn’t transform some tranquility could be preserved. The very appearance of Nidhögg, on the other hand, was a guarantee everyone would panic and do something...regrettable.

“But would our actions really matter that much when the Wizengamot is living its last days?” The Basilisk-Slayer asked rhetorically. “We have a nullity playing the role of Minister, and the Wizengamot is a hereditary pit of corruption and bribery which is unable to agree on anything more serious than cauldron thickness. The system is functionally unjust, and Goblin rebellions are so common the society allows a ghost to drone upon them. The non-human and near-human species aren’t represented, and violence is the only course of action.”

“It looks like you have been making your choice.” Morag commented with a smirk.

“Not completely,” Alexandra denied. “I want to keep my options open.”

“Yes, yes.” The red-haired Irish girl chuckled. “Just be sure to invite us for the big moment. I don’t want to miss when you’re going to unleash all your contingencies at once.”

“But not when it will be the time to pay for them,” Hermione replied tartly.

“Come on Hermione,” Morag began with a tonality which presaged nothing good, “you heard our General. To have the dragon’s backing, we just need to give him a governmental seat...and the keys of the Treasury.”

**22 October 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“And that’s why the Death Eaters were so easily able to escape with no casualties whatsoever in their distraction force,” Lyre raised her eyes from the parchment she was reading. “One might think you don’t listen to me, General.”

“Nah,” Alexandra answered as she stopped eating her large meal of fish and crustaceans. “I listen to you. Fudge or someone under his pay gave the Portkeys which allowed them to arrive wherever they wanted. Since it was the middle of the night and everyone was drunk or so close it made any difference, most wizards and witches were unable to fight back, and the first moves of panic spread too fast, meaning most people who would have fought back were caught in the confusion. And when foreigners really began to fight back, the Death Eaters used their Portkeys to escape.”

Unlike the attack upon House Malfoy, the plan of Voldemort’s servants had been methodically executed in the spirit it had been crouched on parchment. A maximum of destruction and chaos had been created for as little risk for the Death Eaters as it was practically possible.

If the idiots under Lord Yaxley had respected their own part of the plan, it could have been really, really bad. Without any clue as which Dark House had rallied the Lord of the Death Eaters, she couldn’t exactly Apparate all over Britain to see if there weren’t people with skull masks wandering somewhere.

“A fairly accurate description,” the French witch commented. “Apparently, you can really eat incredible amounts of food and listen to me. I’m impressed.”

“Hey!” the Hydra Animagus sent a mock glare at her specialist of foreign affairs. “I will have you know I can do a lot of things at once! Multi-tasking is in my blood!”

“I would rather say it is in your Animagus form.”

The Champion of House Ravenclaw stuck her tongue before going back to her ‘fight’ against the lobster in her plate.

“Why does everyone enjoy criticising my fabulous skills?” the Basilisk-Slayer huffed before returning to a serious expression. “All right. Reading between the lines of your sources’ gossip and the information already gathered, over a hundred foreign wizards and witches rapidly organised to counter the Death Eaters, far faster than the Aurors and the Hit-Wizards were able to react. And none of these ‘concerned citizens’ were British.”

“Quite right.” The blonde-haired third-year Slytherin confirmed. “In fact, I think that if the Death Eaters,” the name was uttered venomously, “had begun their assault on say, the Bulgarian camp, not the English one, the panic effects would have been minimal, and the counter-attack against the invaders would have happened far faster and would have been settled in a far more permanent and decisive manner. I don’t think they would have been able to catch many of them, of course, not with the Portkeys tied into the wards, but not all would have escaped uninjured.”

Something to remember for future operations.

“The Aurors were useless. Most of the British civilians, save a few Irish who believed it was an attempt to steal ‘their’ World Cup, were equally worthless.” The girl who could have lost her life in this unprecedented international fiasco said mercilessly. “If you want troops for your army, take non-magical forces or foreign magical soldiers. On this side of the Channel, it is clear half of the British wizards will behave like cowards at the first glance of a Death Eater.”

“It is a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

It wasn’t that exaggerated, but no one had really thought the war against Voldemort would resume with so little warning. The Chamber of Secret affair had been buried by the waters of the Black Lake for more than a year, and the Battle of Hogsmeade was against Grindelwald and the Exchequer. The former was dead, and the latter were working covertly in the shadows. There had been no reason to expect an attack at the World Cup.

“Say the Champion who exterminated House Yaxley root and branch.”

“I caught them in Death Eater robes while they were coming back from their raid, awaiting their Lord.” Alexandra raised an eyebrow. “Did you think I was going to send them rose bouquets?”

“No,” Lyre de Male-Foi smiled slightly. “My question was more...if there had been underage children in House Yaxley, would you have still exterminated them to make sure Scylla became the new Lady?”

Alexandra played with her fork for the next five seconds.

“No,” the Sword of Death confessed at last. “I wouldn’t have killed any children. But I wouldn’t have left them able to stew on the bigotry their parents no doubt would have filled their heads with. At the very least, I would have taken stern measures, physical and mental, to make sure they never donned a Death Eater’s robe.”

It would not have been pretty. It was not a nice thing to do. But one couldn’t risk encouraging of more Nott and other boys and girls sprouting nonsensical propaganda because this was exactly what they had heard from the moment they were born.

Alexandra sighed. The older she became, the more this world appeared like an ocean of grey, with little white and a lot of darkness, and the Potter Heiress wasn’t speaking about Dark Magic.

“Good, “Lyre replied. “I want to work with Scylla openly. She and I can prepare the background in House Slytherin and spread your word far faster than one isolated witch can.”

“That would mean abandoning any effort in Gryffindor House.”

The blonde witch looked at her sardonically.

“If you think ‘Ginny’ will recruit more than one person in Gryffindor Tower, you’re deluding yourself. Fred and George will take care of House Gryffindor. They’re the best choices to sing your praises there.”

The Champion of the Morrigan narrowed her eyes before nodding.

“You have my blessing...provided Scylla agrees, of course. She is her own person, and don’t forget that.”

“I won’t. But I also know she has suffered from confidence issues due to being one year below you and unable to attend all councils...”

**25 October 1994, London, England**

Artemis Cassius was enjoying the warm blood of a very enthusiastic male donator when her senses detected a hostile presence in her VIP lounge that she had definitely not invited in.

“We will have to continue this moment later, my dear,” the ancient Vampiri Romani told him before using her Thaumaturgy to close the wounds caused by her fangs.

Once the human had left, the female member of the Soul Drinkers Coven used a napkin to remove the blood remaining on her lips.

“The problem with invisibility,” she said conversationally, “is that it doesn’t hide the power behind one’s emotions. Clouding sight and the other senses might work on lesser vampires, but not on me.”

“I will keep it in mind,” the voice was young, and then the Invisibility Cloak was removed, revealing a young woman with dark hair and very familiar shining green eyes.

Artemis had the name of Lily on her lips, but she didn’t voice it. For one, this witch was obviously not her red-haired lover, and secondly, after a few seconds it was far from difficult to recognise the identity of the intruder. The girl was becoming rather infamous around Britain, after all.

“Heiress Alexandra Potter,” not Lilian, but her daughter. “How did you evade my security teams and the Thaumaturgy protections?”

The young witch fell upon the red couch, her cloak in her hands.

“I have advantages your vampires lack,” replied noncommittally the green-eyed teenager.

“I must insist.” Nothing was more important than the security of the Coven.

“If that makes you sleep better,” the pun was really bad, “it took me nights of research to find you, and I had the Black Files to find your old lairs.”

Artemis Cassius had a sudden urge to murder Cassiopeia Black...too bad the woman was long dead and buried.

“Yes, that would do it,” she murmured, not stopping watching the girl, wondering how dangerous the Basilisk-Slayer would prove in a fight could be at close-quarters. “There must be consequences for your intrusion, I hope you realise.”

“Please let’s skip the threats and the bluster,” Lily’s daughter dismissed her words like they were a empty platitude. “Your Thaumaturgy is terribly vulnerable to Death Magic, and save the Lord of Darkness, I am likely the worst opponent possible on this world for all vampires. Even if I wasn’t what I am, Death’s blessings would make a contest between your Coven and I a one-sided slaughter.”

“This is a very powerful statement.”

Nothing changed in the posture of the self-proclaimed Champion of Death. And then without warning, the right part of her body took a reptilian appearance. Black scales with a dot of gold here and there replaced human skin. The most striking part of the transformation was the eye which had changed. It was still green, but now it seemed to burn into a fire promising a fiery agony to any who stepped in her way.

Artemis Cassius was old, very old. She had seen kingdoms and empires fall one after another in orgies of violence, and a Soul Drinker wasn’t scared by a lot. But at this moment, it was forgotten. The witch was not a hundredth her age, and yet the Vampiri Romani female didn’t doubt this was a predator which really could end her here and now.

“Let’s say I accept it.” She continued, fighting the unfamiliar emotion of fear. “Why do you come here? Information on your mother and I?”

“No,” the Potter Heiress rolled her eyes. “Lady Cassiopeia managed to put her hands on your old collection of photos, I’m afraid to inform you.”

Artemis nodded; after the former revelation, it wasn’t a surprise.

“I hope this doesn’t create complications.”

“My mother can take whoever she wants as lover,” there was definitely amusement in the green eyes. “It’s not like she isn’t in age to make her own decisions, or my father is alive to make hypocritical judgements on her lifestyle. And given how beautiful you are, I can’t say she hasn’t taste in her women.”

“Thank you,” The High Sentinel replied, but now having really no idea why a half-blood witch would bother tracking her, except the obvious one: that Death had really ordered her demise.

“As for the reason why I’m here tonight,” the female teenager bared her teeth. “I’m constantly reminded how unfair the Wizarding World is for uncountable souls. As such, this visit is more of a...preliminary investigation to see if vampires would be interested in having a political representation.”

Artemis stayed silent and immobile for long seconds, not bothering to feign breathing.

“No vampires of the Soul Drinkers will ever accept a seat on the Wizengamot, Heiress Potter. There is too much bad blood for us to ever accept placing the weakest and most unpopular member of our Coven under the Ministry’s authority and laws.”

“I don’t remember saying the political representation would include the Wizengamot in any capacity,” The young magical being said calmly.

Artemis allowed herself a purr. Well...what was the proverb, again? Like mother, like daughter. Lilian had abandoned her ideas to reform Britain and travelled to other shores, but her daughter appeared to have found the old files of a buried past.

“Your ideas are not incompatible with certain aspirations of the Soul Drinkers. Though there are certain problems.”

“The Exchequer and Voldemort,” the Basilisk-Slayer said bluntly. “One gives you limited support, the other threatens your powerbase by pushing other vampires into open confrontation with the magical society.”

“Indeed.” The High Sentinel didn’t bother to make a half-objection. There were no witnesses, and the goal wasn’t to convince a court of law. “If you are ready to consider all the implications of this situation, then I think we can negotiate.”

**29 October 1994, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“Today we leave Hogwarts!” Alexandra sang as she entered the dorm. “The day of glory has arrived...”

“No offence Alex, but you don’t know how to sing,” Morag grumbled, trying to hide under her pillow as she opened the curtains to let enter the morning sun of Scotland. “In fact, I think toads are singing better than you.”

“Toads? I will admit I’m far from a professional singer-“

“You are a musical assassin,” the redhead disagreed. “Figures Death would give you the power to kill people with your voice alone...”

“It is treason, then.” Alexandra wandlessly levitated three pillows, and began a miniature bombardment of Morag’s bed. “Surrender, I will be merciful.”

“Never!”

“Come on,” the Potter Heiress crossed her arms as two animated pillows took vengeance in her name. “You haven’t finished packing half of your affairs. As much as I want to see you running behind the Hogwarts Express, it will get old very fast.”

“I fail to find how you can think it’s funny.” Her friend managed to grab her wand and cast a Finite Incantatem. “And I don’t know how you can be so chipper when you sleep less than five hours per night. By the way, why didn’t you go to Hogsmeade Station?”

“Dumbledore and his ‘Light friend’ were there as of one hour ago.” And the day she left anything valuable in their care would be a very cold day in hell, of that she was certain. Fortunately, the travel would last less than twenty-four hours and afterwards they hadn’t to sleep close to *them*. “Now hurry up, after breakfast we have to give our farewells to everyone, and you won’t be able to if you’re in the process of packing!”

“Aye, aye, my mighty Champion...”

**Author’s note**: As I promised, this was the second of the two Hogwarts chapters. For the next one, dear readers, we will leave Britain’s shores.

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