**Chapter 63**

**Fear the Dark Queen**

**5 December 1993, Hofburg, Vienna, Austria**

“I think it answers the question if this Champion of Chaos is a megalomaniac killer with sociopathic tendencies.”

There were just a couple of hours before dawn, and the enchanted wing of the Hofburg Castle which had been used to welcome thousands of wizards and witches was cold and silent. The House Elves, who, as usual, had been the last living beings to clean up the result of the festivities, had all departed. Most of the decorations had been removed. The interior remained magnificent, but in a way similar to a cathedral: silent and haughty.

“Lyudmila Romanov might surprise you.”

Pedro Borja, Lord Treasurer of Magical Spain and accessorily known in certain circles as Knight Treasurer of the Exchequer, snorted.

“Excuse me if I don’t share your confidence, Knight Recruiter. I was more or less resigned to the fact she would find an opportunity to challenge the other Champions nearby. I was certainly not expecting her to insult the students of four schools and challenge them to...how did she formulate it? Last more than one minute in a duel against her?”

The pure-blood wizard allowed his lips to twitch in annoyance.

“I suppose it is a nice help to our plans, but it easily could have proved otherwise. Chaos is a Power of selfishness and instability, and does not value anything save creating more chaos.”

The last point was especially galling for him. For decades and decades he had tried to buy the allegiance of Dark Champions, but those sworn to Chaos proved all too willing to backstab him, generally at the worst moment possible.

“She is a Champion of Loki.”

And that summed-up in a too entirely accurate manner the magnitude of the problem.

“How long has it been since the last one? One millennium and two hundred years?”

“I will have to check the records,” the Succubus said in a thoughtful tone. “But I think it was that long ago, yes.”

The Spanish wizard grunted.

“That pretty much answers my question if it is a coincidence or not. First the Morrigan returns to the game, while everyone was predicting the rise of Hades. Second it’s the time of Loki to play into the realms of men once more. The Prophecy of Camlann is tipping the scales and bringing this era to an end.”

“Let’s see the positive side. This generation of Champions of the Dark is one of the most powerful in the last thousand years. At the same time, the Light...I struggle to find the correct words which describes how untalented and uncharismatic their new generation is.”

“They certainly seem to be waiting for their promised victory, the imbeciles. But then when you have someone like Albus Dumbledore on your side, I suppose being brain-dead is viewed as a quality and a bonus for your hiring appointment.”

For long seconds the two Knights looked at each other. While they weren’t close by any definition of the word, their mutual areas of duties and responsibilities had made them work together thousands of hours in the last decades. As such they both had a good idea what the King’s next order was going to be.

For formality’s sake, it was Pedro who voiced it.

“If Lyudmila Romanov continues to cause problems, she will be eliminated before the Tournament ends. We can tolerate minor antics and unforeseen distractions, not continent-sized upheavals. If we let this girl act, I fear we will have a bigger problem on our hands than Grindelwald ever was by 1995.”

For all his charisma, oratory skills, and raw power, Gellert Grindelwald had been born of a very modest German family, and it was only his precocious magical talent which had allowed him to win a scholarship for Durmstrang. Lyudmila Romanov was however at the top of the magical aristocracy the moment she was born, as befitted the second child of the Imperial House of Romanov.

“Who will eliminate her if she breaks the limits?”

He considered it a massive optimistic effort to not have uttered ‘when’.

“I was thinking about giving the post of the tenth judge to Knight Diplomat. She is a recognised Mistress of the Shadow and Night Arts, so her presence would profusely annoy Dumbledore, and her skill and her abilities are perfectly tailored to kill an alumni of Durmstrang, Champion of Loki or not.”

“I would have thought your choice would be more along the lines of Knight General.”

Not that he disagreed with the choice of Knight Diplomat. For one, she was powerful enough to handle four or five Champions at the same time. For two, her skills were sufficiently obscure and ancient to give Dumbledore or any Light Lord a fight they would remember for the rest of their lives. And this was assuming Knight Recruiter didn’t intervene in the battle.

“Knight General is busy with Knight Explorer in Asia right now. And he’s also one of the Knights we are absolutely sure the Light has neither discovered the identity nor the skills of. The Queen prefers to keep him in reserve until it is time to begin the Grand Plan.”

“If it’s the Queen’s will, so be it. Now let’s talk about gold. I heard you wanted to pay for anti-goblin efforts in Mesopotamia...”

**5 December 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

There were days Filius wished Minerva was more forceful and assertive. This cloudy morning in December was not one of those days.

“We spend hours repeating to our students to stay quiet and respect the protocol and this arrogant Durmstrang girl breaks it without a thought and with no repercussions! If the rules of this ‘European Magical Tournament’ are enforced like that, it is going to be anarchy for nine months!”

“Now, now, Minerva...”

Even the calming voice of the Headmaster was not enough to stop the irate speech of the Head of House Gryffindor.

“Don’t try to change the subject, Albus Dumbledore! Why did you refuse to intervene and discipline that arrogant child?”

It was not the silver-bearded Defeater of Grindelwald who answered the question, though. It was Severus.

“He didn’t intervene because he doesn’t want to deal with the political fallout,” the Head of Slytherin declared bluntly.

“Political fallout?”

“Lyudmila Romanov is the second child of the Tsar of Russia, and in all likelihood, his successor,” Severus Snape explained conversationally. “Anyone who raised his or her wand against her might as well proclaim the Russians his enemies. And that still leaves the issue of the girl herself. There were adult mages more powerful than her at the Winter Ball, but I for one would not have liked to confront her.”

This finally managed to sober up Minerva, who saw the truth in the words of her Slytherin counterpart.

“Severus is telling the truth Minerva, I’m afraid,” the oldest wizard in the room supported his Potions Professor’s judgement. “And unfortunately, by the time she stopped speaking, the damage was done. I’m afraid disciplining her would not have changed anything.”

Severus raised an eyebrow, showing something like dark amusement.

“Besides, how could we really discipline her? Karkaroff is deathly afraid of her. Her teachers at Durmstrang are afraid of her. Her fellow students have learned either to kiss her boots or to stay far away from her. She has no Mastery of the Dark Arts, but I’m sure that between her access to the Romanov libraries, her natural talent, and the important books readable at Durmstrang, she has enough forbidden knowledge in her head to curse an entire city with the Dark.”

“She may be a black mage.” Albus Dumbledore’s declaration was mixed with fear and disgust.

If anything, it seemed to horrify Minerva McGonagall twice more than her employer. Filius didn’t see why it should. Unless she was completely blind, deaf, and mute, it should be evident by now there was one student at Hogwarts who was ‘sworn to a Dark Power’, as the term black mage was defined.

“Why is she even to participate in a Tournament the International Confederation of Wizards supports?”

He supposed it was his time to intervene.

“The ICW leaves a great deal of latitude to all of its members where legislation and forbidden spells are concerned,” the Former Duellist Champion said. “Russia has always been one of the countries where the guidelines on the Dark Arts are...extremely lax.”

To the point that of the three British Unforgivable Curses, the two illegal in Russia were the Imperius and the Cruciatus. That should already be horrifying enough, but to replace the Killing Curse there were something like twenty-plus Dark Rituals and monstrous incantations even the Russian lawmakers had agreed that only someone truly deranged would be able to cast on another wizard or witch.

“In our instance, it doesn’t matter. I have studied the preliminary pamphlet we were handed one week ago, and the European Magical Tournament makes no restriction on Dark and Light magic during the tasks the Champion will have to complete.”

“That’s barbaric!” exploded the Head of Gryffindor.

“I’m more concerned by the fact our students will enter the tasks with a neat disadvantage over the other Champions,” Snape commented icily. “The Durmstrang students I saw yesterday don’t seem to me the type to fight fair and ignore the glaring weaknesses of their opponents. And no, before you ask, most of the students in my House are just amateurs or beginners where Dark Arts are concerned. Between the Ministry guidelines and the incompetence of the Professors, Defence Against the Dark Arts is a joke and we all know it.”

Pomona cleared her throat.

“That is a good point, Severus, and one I think we will all need to keep in mind.”

“Indeed,” the Headmaster caressed his Phoenix which had jumped on his desk. “And while this insolent child is a prodigy of the Dark Arts, I’m sure our own talents can defeat her. Severus, I suppose you have a few names to propose?”

Snape looked at Albus Dumbledore with an incredulous expression.

“I believe I wasn’t sufficiently clear,” the black-clothed and black-haired Slytherin spoke each word slowly, as if he wanted there to be no misunderstanding. “Today, we have absolutely no one to defeat Lyudmila Romanov in a one-on-one duel. To borrow a few words of her insulting speech, about nine-tenths of the Hogwarts will not last a minute before she mopes up the floor with them.”

The Headmaster did not like being delivered the news at all, judging by how his Occlumency was unable to hide his bad mood.

“I refuse to accept this. Hogwarts is one of the prime institutions in this world, and it will hold its rank!”

As much as agreeing with Severus was not good most of the times, Filius had to agree with the dour wizard.

“Headmaster, with all due respect,” a classic method to inform someone what followed was not going to be respectful, “I think you have made a grave mistake. The Hogwarts students, if the last three years are any indication, are not ready to participate in something like this Tournament. I’m sure that if we could host the competition on British soil, the tasks would be tailored to avoid bloodbaths and the lack of survival mentality of our students. But this Tournament will be fought on foreign shores. Judging by what we heard yesterday evening, we are not in control of anything. The judges and the tasks are not planned to give our school an advantage, and the best of the best of the other schools will be there to take the gold and the prizes.”

“Your opinion has been noted,” well, it had been worth a shot. “I think it will be best to organise the first preliminaries in mid-January. We will comply with the organisers’ conditions, and all the Professors of the classes which have been cited will participate in their conception. Since the conditions will depend on how many students of third-year and above wish to participate, we will post the sign-up lists tomorrow morning in the Common Rooms. I have decided that each House will have one Champion in the European Magical Tournament to avoid any accusation of favouritism.”

This brought a half-smile to his visage. Had Dumbledore chosen differently, there would have been a civil war in the Hogwarts corridors before the day was out.

“I am interested in knowing which of your students would be the most motivated in representing Hogwarts next year. Pomona?”

“I had not the time to interrogate them yesterday night, but I think Cedric Diggory is desirous to raise high the banner of Hufflepuff...”

**11 December 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Everything that could be done to attract a large audience had been done. Large banners of House Ravenclaw had been created and hung in the former DADA classroom. House Elves had been bribed to bring drinks and food with the unofficial benediction of Professor Flitwick. The day chosen was a Saturday, which as a rule was devoid of any school obligations. It was not a Hogsmeade week-end – not that there would be one until security measures were lowered and the village was rebuilt to something like its pre-battle appearance.

In the end, it had all been for nothing. The preparations for the ‘Ravenclaw sign-ups for the preliminaries of the European Magical Tournament’ had attracted a grand total of seven students. And of these seven, two, Nigel and Luna to name them, had affirmed from the start they didn’t want to risk even being a substitute for the main event.

“Should we feel depressed to be so few or lucky we have enough witches and wizards to fill the available positions?” demanded Morag while reading the guidebook of the Tournament.

“The latter, I think,” Alexandra replied, watching the rest of the Ravenclaws present in the room. Aside from Morag, Hermione, Nigel, and Luna, the only two members of their House who had decided to come at three in the afternoon were Cho Chang and Roger Davies.

“Definitely the latter,” agreed the Captain of the Quidditch team. “I don’t want to spend half of my winter holidays trying to convince one of my year-mates to sign up for the preliminaries.”

“I would have thought you wanted an empty post,” Morag said with a smile presaging nothing good. “That way you could invite your Badger girlfriend among your four replacements...”

Alexandra sniffed with disdain as the rest of the room chuckled.

“First, Dumbledore has made his point clear when he gave the preliminary rules: each House has been given the same number of empty seats.” The competitor in her wished for a more meritocratic system, one which would definitely choose from the best of all the Houses, but the cynical part of her argued this was for the best. Each House needed Champions to cheer next year, or the inter-Houses rivalries at Hogwarts were going to get out of control. Alexandra wasn’t convinced the mess Dumbledore had created was recoverable, but if Gryffindor or Slytherin had no one to represent them, ‘bad’ was something of an understatement for the chaos sure to follow. “So if we do not manage to find a fifth candidate, we do not get to choose someone from another House; we have in effect renounced to fill this position and we are giving it back to the Professors. They might name a Hufflepuff in the end, but it would certainly not be the one I want. And secondly, Susan would not thank me, because she’s doing the preliminaries in Hufflepuff, for the chance to be a second to Diggory.”

She stuck her tongue out in Morag’s direction.

“And since you want to discuss my relationship with Susan in public, you and I will have a little friendly duel after this session.”

“Is it too late to withdraw my words?” the red-haired asked. Alexandra didn’t even bother dignify it with an answer, only a wide grin.

Roger Davies coughed discreetly.

“Ahem. As funny as this conversation is, I want us to return to the subject of the preliminaries.” The Ravenclaw sixth-year grimaced. “Our House is more renowned for its academic performances at the final exams of year’s end than athletics, our last two victories in the Quidditch Cup notwithstanding. I understand our Housemates will likely be more eager where the lesser preliminaries of Quidditch, Duelling, and more will be announced. But we can’t forget that a lot of the reluctance from the boys and girls of Ravenclaw is that no one wants to face Lyudmila Romanov.”

The other six students in the classroom nodded in unity with various degrees of unhappiness on their faces. The ultimatum-challenge Lyudmila Romanov had delivered at Vienna would have been nothing by itself. Alexandra knew the Dark Queen was in all likelihood deadly serious, and as a Champion of Chaos had the magical power and the...ruthlessness to enforce this. But most students didn’t know the first thing about Lyudmila Romanov one week ago, and only forty Hogwarts students had been able to listen to her speech – and even less had understood it, since it had not been spoken in English. The Ravenclaws should not have been that afraid.

Except, of course, that cow of Marietta Edgecombe had gone directly to her mother and asked her for everything the British Ministry had on the Dark Queen. By herself, the Edgecombe woman had only a few rumours and anecdotes to share, but the Ministry was leaking secrets like a sieve, and by Thursday entire files where Romanov was the sole subject of study had travelled to Hogwarts. The arrival of the beggar-like Professor Lupin had been relegated to minor news quasi-instantly.

To be honest, Alexandra didn’t think it was credible that Lyudmila Romanov routinely journeyed near the North Pole to drink ice tea in skull cups with her minions the snow trolls. She was even more dubious of the rumour that the Russian Champion had erased several non-magical villages off the map before dividing the corpses into two groups and making the Inferi armies fight each other until total annihilation was achieved. This didn’t mean the Chaos Champion was not going to be a tough opponent. Since she was sworn to the Dark, Lyudmila Romanov had a magical Animagus form to take, and she would be stupid to not use it. For best or for worse, stupidity did not seem to be one of the weaknesses the Basilisk-Slayer could count on for this calibre of opponents. You didn’t manage to stay at the top of the predator chain in a school like Durmstrang if you were unintelligent and naive. The long list of people the Dark Queen routinely sent to the infirmary was testament to that.

The Hogwarts students, especially Ravenclaws, were not heralds of mental fortitude. The moment the Ministry ‘information’ had been delivered, they had all taken it like it was mithril on a gold platter, and promptly panicked. It was not funny, but in a week the name of Lyudmila Romanov had in Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Towers achieved an infamy Alexandra had not been able to gain in two and a half years.

Early in the morning there had been whispers that the Durmstrang prodigy was about to make a pact with the Scuola Regina. Should she win the Tournament, the students of Hogwarts and the other schools would be sacrificed to fuel one of her secret and abominable Dark Rituals.

It would not have been that bad if Luna was not the one who had started this particular rumour. And if one-third of Hufflepuff and two-thirds of Ravenclaw believed it like it was an iron-clad document.

Anyway, the reactions of the student body varied between two extremes. There were the ones terrified by the ‘facts’ their parents and the Ministry propaganda were delivering. These ones absolutely refused to involve themselves in the main trials of the European Magical Tournament. Participating in the preliminaries was seen as too dangerous, for it gave you the minor risk of facing the Dark Witch’s wrath. And they were the ones that were convinced the Champion of Chaos had to be defeated before she imitated Grindelwald and Voldemort. Guess which House was the most sonorous about this solution.

“I do not want to particularly face her, you understand,” the Potter Heiress admitted.

“This is not exactly the motivating speech I wanted to hear, you understand,” Roger told her while grabbing a few sweets from the House Elves’ deliveries.

“If you want me to lie, Roger, I certainly can do it. In front of the Common Room and all our Housemates, if that’s what you truly desire. But I have to stay realistic. Lyudmila Romanov is very, very bad news. No, I don’t believe she bathes in the blood of her victims every morning. No, I don’t think she tortures ten students per session when her Dark Arts teacher has his back turned. But I believe that a certain amount of wariness and caution towards her are common sense. And as it stands, I will not try to challenge her one-on-one in duel at the first opportunity.”

“Sure. But you realise what it looks like from our point of view,” Cho Chang intervened. “If you, a Basilisk-Slayer, are wary of this Dark Lady-in-training, then our personal chances go from small to non-existent.”

“I know.” It was not something she wanted to express in front of her friends, never mind any strangers or non-allies, but it had to be said. “I dearly wish we could have recruited a few seventh-years for the Tournament like Penelope. We could use their esoteric knowledge and their skills.”

But Penelope was too old for the Tournament, and besides once you graduated from your school, you were ineligible per the Tournament’s rules.

This was not giving her fuzzy feelings in the stomach. The Tournament was still about ten months away, and they were forced to react to their opponents’ every move. She had been asking herself a lot these last few days whether or not the Queen of the Exchequer was bluffing or not.

“Hermione, in your opinion, which order should we arrange for the Championship?”

Her bushy-haired friend raised her head from the guidebook with a frown.

“From what I read of the ancient Triwizard Tournaments, it’s almost a tradition to fight a dangerous beast or to face a challenge which will test the survival skills of the Champions. If the organisers of the European Magical Tournament continue the tradition...”

“It’s likely they will try something spectacular for the First Trial,” Morag supported her. “This is a new Tournament, and they won handily in front of the ICW selection committee. Luckily for us, we have Alexandra to save us...”

“Your sense of sacrifice will never cease to astonish me,” Alexandra yawned. “I don’t want to really think about it, but if I am out of the game who will take my place?”

“Roger is the best candidate,” Cho offered. “Of us five, he will be the only one in his seventh year, and between his Quidditch training and his magical knowledge, he should be able to represent the best of what Ravenclaw epitomes.”

“Then it will be Cho, me, and Hermione will be the fourth replacement,” the red-haired Irish suggested. No one voiced his or her objections. If it came time to unleash Hermione against other Champions, the situation would be so disastrous they might as well attempt a last come back or go back home tails between their legs.

This was not the worst team Ravenclaw could have fielded, not even close. And at least two of her friends were in it, with Cho as a ‘maybe’ and Roger as ‘semi-friendly’ and ‘older teenager’. Now if Susan could take one of the Hufflepuff Champions’ substitutes places and they had one or two ‘trusty’ Slytherins available...

“May the Nargles and the Great Crumple-Horned Snorkacks watch over you,” Luna raised her eyes from the *Quibbler*.

“Convince your wrackspurts to fire Dumbledore,” Alexandra told the blonde-haired second year, “and I will pay for the *Quibbler* publications for the rest of my life...”

**12 December 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“You can approach, Cho. Unlike what the rumours say, I do not bite when no one is looking.”

The Ravenclaw fourth-year could not help but chuckle at this sentence, before walking the last steps and taking a seat in front of Alexandra Potter. She could not help but notice that there were a few black and gold scales disappearing on the skin of the other girl’s right arm. In five seconds, they were completely gone, but she was sure it was not an illusion or her breaking under the stress of the winter tests the Professors loved to torture the students with.

“What are you reading, out of pure curiosity?”

There was a second or two of silence, before the pale lips twitched and the younger Ravenclaw spoke.

“I’m trying to find books on the Gaelic *geas*,” the green-eyed witch told her. “Or I should say I was trying to find reliable books on them. There are no sections dedicated to them, and by now the few paragraphs I’ve been able to discover are unanimous in their repetition that it’s a ‘Lost Art’ or ‘ a Forbidden Lost Art’.”

“Or a variation of more words like ‘extinct’ and ‘illegal’ I suppose,” she commented neutrally.

The book was shut with in a loud clap, indicating she had to be right on this issue. Not that you needed to be Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot to guess correctly.

“Yes. I sometimes wonder how certain pure-blood wizards can be so...arrogant about their power. The more I investigate, the more I think the Order created by the ICW and championed by Britain has resulted in throwing entire libraries into forgotten cells. It is worse than stagnation. It is...it is limitation for the sake of limitation.”

“You will not hear any argument from me on this subject.” There were a lot of political ideas she didn’t agree with the Basilisk-Slayer on, but the magic-restraining policies of the Ministry weren’t one of them. “I don’t think Morgana La Fay would be such a threat if every wizard and witch had the lore of the first war wizards and the creators of many branches of Curse-Breaking and Ward-Mastery available.”

“It’s difficult to say, as we don’t have these resources,” the other Ravenclaw gritted between her teeth. Sharper than usual, those teeth. “I have difficulties imagining how it could be worse, though. As it stands, forging of magical weapons, geas enchanting, and creation of skinchanger drugs can join Summoning in the list of things the authorities utterly disapprove of but our enemy enjoys tossing around because the lore to protect yourself has been lost.”

This was a point most Gryffindors were unable to appreciate. Or should she say they were going to be unable to appreciate it before they faced a Dark Champion in a duel to the death next year?

The Ministry – and Dumbledore too – were bordering on senility these days. Like in real life, every type of magic was going to be authorised in the European Magical Tournament. The only rules would be the ones the judges would give at the beginning of every Trial. That meant the girl in front of her could electrocute the Gryffindor Champion with her lethal war spells, and face absolutely no equivalent counter-strike. The Killing Curse was not the only lethal spell in existence, just one which was totally unblockable with magical shields.

“You could pressure Longbottom and Malfoy to change the laws. They found you ravishing in your emerald dress...”

“Cho...” the bright green eyes shone like mini-suns of green, and the hiss of a beast was heard behind her name’s call. “I do not comment your love life with Diggory in public – nice blue Chinese dress, the poor Badger could not help but look at your breasts, by the way – and you do not try to spread rumours about mine. Deal?”

“Deal.” She didn’t want compromising photos to appear on the *Loud Duck*’s first page, thank you very much. “I came to you for the Life Debt. I read on page 135 of the European guidebook we can’t have any sort of magical obligations...”

The work in question was instantly levitated on the table and the Exiled Queen found the page in mere seconds.

“Indeed,” the third-year acknowledged. “Hermione has certainly not recognised the political consequences of this rule. But I can see the principle. No challenger or substitute is going to die for a Champion because a Life-Debt compels him or her.”

“Glad you agree.”

Despite herself, Cho felt really sick inside. Life-Debts were serious business, and paying in gold was absolutely not an option for her which left...

She didn’t know all the options but certain ones were worth vomiting just by mentioning them. And yes, she was glad Alexandra Potter had saved her, but that didn’t mean she wanted to spend her life paying the debt. Even if there were rumours Neville Longbottom had a debt voided not too long ago...

“I will consider the Life-Debt properly paid for if you agree to two conditions, Cho. The first, and the one which is going to take a long time, is that I have your full support, be it in magic, lore, or influence, for the duration of the European Magical Tournament. I do not want to arrive at one Trial and wake up on a hospital bed one week later only to be informed one Ravenclaw had decided to not give me access to a spell or a ward able to turn the tide.”

This felt more like a contract for one year, than a true Oath. She could work with that.

“Agreed. Of course, I will probably have to teach you Mandarin, and soon, if you want to really study my books. Translation is possible, but it would be like explaining the concept of colours to someone who is blind.”

“And here I thought I had done something complicated by learning French,” Alexandra Potter gave her an exhausted grin. “I will have to find the place somewhere in my schedule. The second condition is far simpler and immediate. I want to know your true name.”

Internally, Cho cursed the curiosity and the intelligence of the Ravenclaws. Of course, of all the people who could ask themselves the question, it was the Exiled Queen in person knocking on the forbidden door.

But since she was obviously an Animagus-in-training, prying the secret out of her mind would be extremely difficult. And they had to defeat her first.

“You can’t reveal it to anyone,” she pleaded.

“I would offer an Oath of Secrecy, or something similar,” the Basilisk-Slayer said in a genuinely apologetic tone, “but since Samhain, it seems the binding agreements are reacting...wildly around me. Is it that much of a big reveal?”

“For British wizards and witches, absolutely not,” the Ravenclaw fourth-year was forced to concede. “But there are other people in the world with more violent philosophies and methods.”

She took a large breath and cast five more privacy Charms before whispering words she had not spoken in over five years.

“My real name is Xiao Hong Ming.”

By the hiss her interlocutor made, she had recognised the importance of the name.

**16 December 1993, Hogwarts, Scotland**

“At least that’s a mystery solved.”

“Which mystery?” Morag laughed. “There’s been a lot of them lately...”

“Why Atalanta, my faithful owl, has been curiously absent these last weeks. And why she sent this great owl named Leonardo in her stead to deliver my letters when she absolutely refused to do so months ago.”

“And the reason is?”

Alexandra smirked.

“It seems I am now a mother by proxy,” she handed to her friend the compromising photo. The photo of the inner Owlery at Zabini Manor where a familiar owl was watching with vigilant eyes tiny bowls of white fluff.

“Oh, these jigglypuffs are adorable!” Luna exclaimed. “I want one, I want one!”

“How many eggs did she hatch?” Hermione demanded, clearly succumbing like the others to the charming spectacle displayed by the photos.

“Six, it looks like.” Alexandra read the letter which had arrived with the photos. “All are in good health, though the Zabini personnel have only done the minimum health and security checks. And those were done while Atalanta was asleep. For some reason, she is very, very protective of her owlets...”

All the Exiled chuckled. Having been in contact with the great snowy owl for many months, they had known her owl was not shy defending what fell inside her territory.

“It looks like the lineage of the snowy owl is going to continue for a few generations,” she said happily as the photos attracted more and more Ravenclaws. Her owl was often prickly and insufferable, but there was no denying Atalanta was beautiful, be it in flight or at rest, her white feathers breaking the monotony of grey, brown and black owls without even trying.

“What will you do with them? With the number of owls Blaise’s mother keeps at home, she doesn’t really need more of them, so they will be yours.”

“Well, first I’m going to search for appropriate names.” It had taken her a long time to find one appropriate for Atalanta when she had bought her from the owls’ shop. “I think I can afford to wait two-three months before deciding what to do about them. I may have use for two or three, though. There’s always more letters to deliver for official and unofficial business, and with a good, reliable snowy owl, people I trust will have one more guarantee I am the messenger.”

Nigel shrugged.

“Just to warn you, you may soon find yourself overwhelmed with snowy owls. With magic and the owleries the messenger owls take for granted, they can breed a lot without experiencing the problems of the winter season. And Atalanta is really, really popular with the male owls...”

“Bah, Scotland and the Isles as a whole will be far more beautiful if snowy owls are once again a permanent sight in the woods and the old castles...”

It took nearly ten minutes to recover all the owl photos, and she had to hit Creevey with a jinx in the rear to teach him that, yes the owlets were superb, but he had not been invited by anyone at the Ravenclaw Table. Seriously, the boy was exhausting, and his stalker tendencies had stopped being hilarious after the first couple of months last year.

The conversation was diverted to other subjects as they climbed the stairs to return to the Common Room.

“Did the letter tell you where Lady Zabini will spend the end of the year?”

“Yes, but in her own words, most of the activities are not carved in the marble. She wanted to visit Paris last summer, but we already did that with our tiring shopping sessions. The only very big thing which has been decided and won’t be changed is the visit of *my dear father* on the other side of the Channel on December 20.”

Her thoughts since Samhain were very much conflicted wherever the subject of her mother was spoken about. Her father, on the other hand...she wanted to have a frank discussion with him. The French Healers who cared for him thought she would be able to have one, however it was kind of a single opportunity. The French had Potions for these kinds of desperate situations, where Lords and other wealthy wizards were mentally unsound but had left no will behind them. Unfortunately, there were also toxic if taken twice per year. More and more of James Potter’s lucidity and sanity were slipping away day after day, and the Healers and other medical personnel who had examined his case knew too little about the Dementors. It didn’t help that the mental degradation had obviously reached a critical stage at least a few weeks before Samhain.

Maybe someone in the British Ministry knew how to heal the mental damage from Dementors – though Alexandra had a lot of doubts personally. But officially James Potter was still a fugitive. In the wake of Hogsmeade’s battle, the Ministry had had other things to do than pursuing an insane man already in a French hospital and incapable to escape. There were scapegoats to find for the ravages the Army of Light and the Exchequer had caused. There were political feuds to fight, there were goblins to insult, and there was Hogsmeade to rebuild – another hot political debate of the Wizengamot was about who was going to pay the final bill, incidentally.

As long as James Potter stayed in France, effectively under house arrest and in a near catatonic state, the Ministry was ready to ignore him. But if he was moved to the British Isles, the gloves would come off, and the Dementor’s Kiss had not been rescinded.

As much as she had been disgusted by the sight of the man when they had met at Hogsmeade and as much as she hated him for abandoning her for over twelve years...Alexandra didn’t want her father to die like this. No one deserved to have his or her soul sucked out by those monsters.

Alexandra winced before continuing to expand on the letter’s contents.

“Once that visit is done, we are going overseas if we stick to this plan. Lady Zabini owns a private island near...an archipelago named Angro Del Reis?”

“Angra Dos Reis,” corrected Blaise coming up behind her. “The Marina Island is a few kilometres south of the Gipoia Island in this bay. I hope you will allow me to take a few photos of you in bikini. I want to make Malfoy and Longbottom fight each other for...why are you drawing your wand?”

“Guess,” Alexandra replied by baring her teeth. “I am working on some new ice spells after the Ministry declared most of my Lightning incantations illegal. Care to serve as guinea pig?”

The Slytherin boy ran, but not fast enough; when he vanished down in a distant corridor, his left arm and most of his back had a lot of frost on them.

“Extraordinary!” Nigel announced with a tone so loud it had to be done for the nearby students of Ravenclaw. “Do we announce a love rivalry between the Boy-Who-Lived of Gryffindor and the Malfoy Heir?”

“Write this anywhere, and no one will ever find the bodies,” Alexandra hissed threateningly.

**20 December 1993, Nantes, France**

Alexandra was very glad she had left her wand outside the hospital room, because at this very moment, cursing the man named James Potter was looking increasingly like a stress-relieving and acceptable answer.

“Your minable excuse is a prophecy.”

Somehow, after Hogsmeade, she had been able to convince herself that the ramblings of her father were just that: the words of a madman.

But now that he was in front of her with some measure of sanity back in him for the next three hours, Alexandra knew this had not just been a delusion.

Whatever intelligence had been given at her conception, her father had not kept any for himself.

It was not something to be proud of...but it would be very Gryffindor-like.

“You sold my mother and me for a prophecy.” Alexandra shook her head in disbelief. “The Christians hate Judas because he sold the Christ for thirty silver coins. I wonder what they would say about you.”

“I didn’t know...” It was a good thing she had inherited the eyes of her mother and a lot of her traits, because what she felt now looking at him was not affection but revulsion.

“The Army of Light’s reputation has been forged in bloody massacres and killings. Voldemort,” her father shivered in fear, “has not killed a tenth of the people these self-proclaimed ‘Light wizards’ have. Dumbledore is an inoffensive white sheep compared to them. Morrigan damn it, even the Exchequer I think has at least the excuse they are the bad guys bent on world domination.”

“Don’t compare the Light to those Dark monsters!” the dark-haired man she was ashamed to call her father snapped back.

“Why? Both tried to kill me in the last few years. In the case of the Exchequer, it was not personal, though it is going to leave me nightmares until I die. In the case of the Army of Light, it was definitely me they wanted dead, and they could have killed every inhabitant of Hogsmeade, hundreds of teenagers and younger children and more if I had not stopped them dead.”

“You have just to return to the Light and forsake what you are...then I’m sure everything will be fine.”

No, there had not been much intelligence coming from the paternal side of things, obviously.

“And if I do and they continue to try to kill me?” Alexandra asked sarcastically. “What am I supposed to do them? Kiss their shoes and thank my killers for their merciful sense of justice?”

It almost made her giggle.

“I’m sorry to disappoint, but if they want to kill me, they will have to do it the hard way. I’m learning new war spells, and if by some strange coincidence they visit you, you can tell them the number of dead next time they try to kill me will make the Battle of Hogsmeade look like a minor amusement.”

“You are Dark.”

“I have one life, and I intend to enjoy my life to the fullest extent,” she corrected James Potter. “Exchequer, Army of Light, Dumbledore, Voldemort...if they are stupid enough to try to assassinate me, I will make sure their deaths are as violent and unpleasant as possible. I am alive. I intend to stay that way as long as possible. Was there anything else you wanted to say?”

The Potter Heiress did not add ‘idiot’ or ‘moron’ after her question, but she was sure her voice had perfectly conveyed her feelings.

“The Guardian of the Secret Frank and Alice chose when the Fidelius was cast...it was Algernon Longbottom.” She barely raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You don’t look surprised.”

“I am not. My friends and I had thought in this direction before. What Voldemort did on that Samhain night over a decade ago...it was a crime. And if the Aurors and the DMLE of that time had been smart, they would have wondered ‘who profits the most from this crime?’

She rolled her shoulders at the stupidity of the Wizarding World.

“I suppose that with the Lord, the Lady, and the Heir dead, the old grandmother-Regent in mourning, he could have easily become the new Lord of House Longbottom and aligned himself months after months with the Death Eaters’ agenda. I think the man has children of his own, so his line would have supplanted the primary branch of the Longbottom family.”

“And that doesn’t incite you to do something right?” For an instant, the crazy look he gave her made her fear the Potions had run their course, but no her father calmed after a minute.

“It’s a bit rich coming from you...do something right. You really have no shame, do you?” Alexandra sighed, more disgusted than ever by the mental cowardice of the man her mother had married. “For the record, I slew two Basilisks, saved Neville Longbottom for free, and removed the threat of Voldemort once from Hogwarts during my second year.”

James Potter grimaced once more at the name of Voldemort. It was really pathetic.

“Look at you. You’re unable to listen to his name without shaking in your shoes. And you wanted to fight a war against that monster? It was going so well...”

Alexandra breathed out and tried to find something like calm in her heart. Something the hydra definitely made more difficult by pouring anger and rage into her head and her lungs.

“When I do something right, the hypocrites of the Order of the Phoenix, you know the men and women you call your friends, are always trying to stab me in the back, preferably when the threat is over. Dumbledore is the worst, but some are not far behind. Sirius Black comes to mind.”

“Sirius has always been...”

“Don’t bother,” the green-eyed girl interrupted him. “You named him my godfather, and we all know how much his oath was worth when it was time to honour it.”

“You could give him a second chance.”

Alexandra did one thing she was only able to do from three days ago. She partially transformed her right arm. Gold-black scales replaced her skin, and her hand became a massive claw. Just for the show, she transformed her eyes into serpentine irises too.

“The last boy I tried to give a second chance...I had to make an example of him and even then I think I should have killed him in a roundabout way immediately. It would have saved me a lot of trouble for sure. Giving a second chance to someone only works if the person is truly repentant.”

Annabeth Blackford had proved that. The pure-blood Slytherin girl had completely broken apart from the Junior Death Eaters. But the others, guys like Warrington and Montague...

She stopped the transformation and returned her body to its normal appearance.

“A second chance does not come without conditions. Crimes and horrific acts must not be forgotten just because someone tells you he’s ‘sorry’. At the end of the day, you have to reap the price of your law-breaking.”

“Then what price are you going to pay, *daughter*?”

Alexandra chuckled.

“What makes you think I have not been paying it since my first birthday? In fact, I think I have paid for your sins more than I deserve...”

“You are a black mage now. You are one of the Damned. There will be no price more expensive to pay when the Light triumphs.”

Yes, it had been too much to hope for a reasonable and rational debate.

“I think I can think of one. Yours. According to the Healers, you have at best two years before your mind completely breaks and they are forced to...put you out of this miserable existence. Lady Zabini has agreed to pay for your hospital room until the end, and at least the nice French wizards and witches will learn more about the danger represented by the Dementors.”

“Your mother...”

“Don’t speak about my mother. Don’t.” Whatever sympathy she had for him, it died for him. “She fought for me. She, at least, embodies the qualities of House Gryffindor. Nobility, courage, willingness to fight for your loved ones. You on the other hand were all for pranking and tormenting Slytherins, but when it became a real problem, it was all about cowardice and fighting for a cause you weren’t even sure was going to be triggered in your lifetime.”

“She was here...”

“Well, if she was I am really surprised you are still alive.”

Alexandra was completely honest about that. Given the...events of 1981, she didn’t think Lily Potter was going to be very happy with her husband, Sirius Black, or anyone taking orders from Dumbledore.

“I wanted...she said if you forgive me...”

“Forgive you?” Had the man’s brain fallen apart in the last fifteen minutes? “Are you kidding me? Thanks to you and your *excellent* choices, *father*, I was sent to live with the Dursleys. You would need to achieve many, many things to earn your redemption in my eyes. Things that you have never done, and we know pertinently that even if you had your sanity back for ten more years, you wouldn’t do.”

The man could have thrown himself at her feet. He could have implored, promised he would be a better man. But no, he was seated on his bed like he had been for the length of this conversation, and looked at her with a tiny light in his eyes...

In the end, Alexandra understood James Potter still thought he had done the right thing.

“I do not forgive you. You do not deserve it.”

And the thirteen year-old witch ran out of the room before she began to cry.

**21 December 1993, Marina Island, Angra Dos Reis**, **near Brazil**

At times when she was at Hogwarts, it was easy to forget Ladies like Stella Zabini had millions of Galleons in their vaults and dominated the magical world with their businesses. But seeing the little corner of paradise called the Marina Island, about one hundred and seventy kilometres south of Rio, this temptation went out the window.

The water surrounding the island was a natural azure, and just by glancing at it you wanted to plunge in and swim. The temperature on the beach was about thirty-five degrees Celsius, and apparently it was staying that way nine out of twelve months per year. The sky was a different blue than the waters, but nonetheless magnificent, and the island was a spectacle like in the movies.

And they were nearly alone. The wards repelled every human who was not keyed in to them, leaving only the animals, the birds, and the fishes on the sands, the miniature tropical forest, and the sea.

It was perfect for removing her dark thoughts about the conversation of yesterday. And Morag and Hermione were going to be incredibly jealous, especially Hermione. Her parents wanted to go skiing in France again, so her bushy-haired friend was going to endure the snow and the cold while she enjoyed the sun.

Still, she was going to have to do the homework the Professors had given them tomorrow, because the more time they spent here...the more she wanted to do nothing but swimming, sun-bathing, and enjoying how beautiful and silent this island was. The hydra loved the warmth and the nearby water, so it wasn’t like she was going to get a lot of complaint from her inner animal...

“I leave you until Christmas to enjoy everything this island has to offer,” Stella Zabini told Blaise and her as they levitated the trunks to the white villa half-hidden between the trees. “Then we will begin the training.”

“Err...no offense, Stella, but don’t I need an Animagus Professor if I train away from civilisation?”

After all, if it turned wrong, the closest magical hospital was...far, far away. There were Portuguese enclaves in Northern Brazil, but most of the powerful nations had their cities deep in the continent’s interior...

“That will not be necessary, since I am a special case and you have an Animagus form which is a cousin to snakes,” and just like that about a third of Stella’s visible skin was replaced with dark green scales.

This was not an Animagus transformation. This was far too fluid, even with experience and talent factored in. It was like...

And then she realised it. It was evident, in hindsight. Why would the House of Sforza be the only one to play with crossbreeding experiments?

And as the legs had disappeared and the serpentine appearance of Stella Zabini disappeared into the house, Alexandra realised she had two of her questions answered in one.

She was sure the wizards and witches of House Sforza found the powers of a Succubus quite a boon when added to their descendant’s blood.

Being able to transform into a Lamia was not a bad move, either. Those magical creatures lived centuries, they had limited Metaphormagi abilities, and they were redoubtably intelligent.

But above all, their venom was practically impossible to detect, and it provoked in its victim an evolved version of the Mackled Malaclaw’s venom.

For those who had been sleeping in Potions, this meant that in her fangs, the Lamia had the power to give you a pure dose of sheer, pure, terrifying bad luck. The kind of bad luck that, should there be thirteen tragic accidents that could happen to you before breakfast, you would be on the receiving end of the thirteen accidents all at once and be robbed by a pickpocket at the same time.

Or, to quote a more interesting example, it was the kind of bad luck which saw a series of healthy men die one after the other, leaving their young and charming widow behind them.

Alexandra turned to Blaise and sighed.

“You are not going to turn reptilian in the next couple of minutes, are you?”

“I am too young to transform...for now. But be careful...”

A Depulso later, and the Slytherin boy was thrown feet first into the azure waters.

**Author’s note**: The year 1993 will end next chapter, I believe. If everything goes according to the plan, there should be two chapters for the Winter holidays under the tropics, and then the Exiled will return to Hogwarts. To the Tournament preliminaries and deal with new challenges...

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