**Chapter 96**

**War Courts**

**6 January 1995, Champion's Lodge, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

After signing autographs for over twenty minutes, trying to not be blinded by the flashes of dozens of official newspapers' photographs, and struggling to not be drowned out by the clamour of the spectators, Alexandra was mentally exhausted.

It was thus with a certain relish the young raven-haired witch fell upon a red comfy seat inside the lodge she had been escorted to.

Seriously, the decisions taken days ago had made sure this Task wasn't physically and magically exhausting like the Second Task was, but it sure as Pandemonium exhausted her mentally.

Thank the Morrigan, it was all over.

Yes, the scores weren't announced, the Judges having withdrawn to some place deep in the Coliseum's structure, but Alexandra had done everything she could to win and get the best score possible.

It was over for today. Only four more Tasks to go.

The Potter Heiress was drinking a large glass of delicious orange juice when a second Champion arrived inside the lodge.

And though she had turned her hair black and adopted a slightly different face, there was no doubt it was Lucrezia Sforza.

It went without saying that the Succubus Champion hadn't a scratch on her...or a piece of cloth looking so much as unfashionable and ruffled.

"Were they entirely non-magical?" the Champion of Lust began bluntly.

"I beg your pardon?" Alexandra raised an eyebrow. Why people thought she could catch the implicit meaning of an entire conversation in a few words, she would never know. Yes, she had learned Occlumency, but she didn't know how to read other people's thoughts...and she wasn't sure she wanted to, honestly.

"The trebuchets you built," Lucrezia said after filling a crystal glass with some sort of wine the very colour of blood. "Were they entirely non-magical?"

Alexandra stared at the older witch. On the one hand, informing the Champion of Lust of some technical information was a guarantee the information would land in the King of the Exchequer's hands before the sun set today. On the other hand, it wasn't as if the Avatar of Darkness really needed her to build siege engines, no?

"No," the green-eyed Champion of Death admitted reluctantly and truthfully. "There was too little time and we were too much in a hurry to be ready in time. I personally Apparated to several museum and medieval non-magical reproductions to have the schematics and everything, but to have the accuracy and firepower I wanted, my loyal assistants and I were forced to...improvise."

By this single word, the Ravenclaw Champion meant that a lot of the various pieces of wood used for the experiments had been carved with Runes, been subjected to numerous Charms, or coated with various substances to make sure they could handle the stress of firing them several dozen times for the Task ahead.

It had worked.

Was Alexandra going to fire them again after today if given the choice?

No.

The three trebuchets had been dreamed about and then built to get around the rules. They had worked magnificently for that purpose, and it was more than enough.

"What a massive amount of cheating you did," the Succubus commented with the voice of seductress.

Alexandra raised both eyebrows.

"Funny you of all Champions call me a cheater," the British-born witch sarcastically began, "I'm pretty sure you receive hints from your intelligence network and hints from your friends and associates which refer to past pre-arranged plans. You're dancing subtly around the rules, Lust...you're just far less blatant about it than all of the other Champions."

"Far less blatant than *you*," the daughter of the Scuola Regina Headmistress corrected, not wasting her saliva denying the accusation Alexandra had just made. "It mustn't have been cheap."

"Good help is not cheap," Alexandra admitted neutrally. "And I had to pay for a lot of things in a hurry. The materials, the expertise, and some very specific things to build war machines which haven't been built for centuries aren't available by the thousands these days."

Ultimately, the final cost would certainly rise up to six thousand Galleons, one-sixth of which had gone to pay Fred, George, Susan, and everyone who had helped her in this 'trebuchet adventure'.

This wasn't a small investment in gold, and it wouldn't be compensated immediately, since, assuming she won the Task and took up the lead in the rankings, the monetary reward would be of 'only' one thousand and five hundred Galleons.

But the 'non-monetary rewards' of the First and Second Tasks, either won by the Dark Queen or she, were sufficiently valuable for the effort to be justified, gold loss or not.

And the winner of the Tournament would earn one hundred thousand Galleons. Hell, the third Champion of the rankings by the end of the seventh Task would receive ten thousand Galleons.

Alexandra was going to say it was an investment for the rest of the Tournament...but she really, really wasn't going to make it for every Task...at least that wasn't part of the plan.

"I'm glad to hear that I was beaten by someone who made a serious commitment in gold and time," the currently black-eyed Champion said in a very serious manner before smirking and taking a conspirator's voice. "I really wanted to win this Task, you know. Since I didn't, I can take some satisfaction I wasn't beaten by a pathetic child soaked in the providential power of Fate."

Alexandra huffed.

"So you noticed."

"Dear Death," the Succubus purred, "either the boy you call your fellow Champion drank Liquid's Luck despite all the security measures and the wards to prevent it, or he used the power of Fate. He wasn't exactly discreet! Who in his right mind would try to cross a hall while the Champion of Chaos and a millennia-old dragon fight each other?"

Yes, with hindsight, the Boy-Who-Lived had painted a gigantic target upon his back with his deed.

Alexandra had cheated outrageously...or as she would say in public, 'creatively interpreted the rules'...but everyone in the public understood how she had done it. The Champion of the Morrigan had left it to the Judges to decide if it was a legal move or not, but the deed in and of itself was not mysterious at all.

Whether Longbottom...

"Not wanting to defend him, but he's working with what he has."

"What he has is lamentable, and is completely outmatched by any self-respecting Champion." The Succubus spoke this time with a terrible and dark honesty. "When Providence runs out, the little Champion will fall."

*When*. Not *if*. Nice to know that whatever the Exchequer had planned, the culmination point would be triggered before the Summer Solstice.

"Maybe," Alexandra shrugged, "but he's still won half a success, no? He touched the throne of the Light first, and claimed second place for this Task. While I don't think it's going to translate into a big number of Tournament points, the way the objects and the instructions were presented heavily suggested some things in my humble opinion."

"And what are those 'things' your intellect suggest, oh Champion of Death?"

"That for the Fourth Task of next month, the Champions who touched the thrones first will be the leaders of their respective factions." Alexandra saw no need to not share her guess; it was not as if it was going to matter very soon.

"I have not all the details," Lucrezia Sforza watched her like a predator looked at a peer, "but I think you are very close to the truth."

White teeth were bared.

"You will have to make a choice before the day is over." The Succubus purred. "And in the interest of continuing this delicious exchange of truths, yes, my sources are confident the Fourth Task and the Venetian Carnival will be one and the same this year. As the British are not noted to excel in the codes and the customs of this noble event, my assistance would be incredibly advantageous to you."

"And it would hardly be cheap, be it in favours or in magical oaths, I suppose."

"To quote your own words," the Venetian Heiress smiled with undisguised satisfaction, "good help is never cheap."

Alexandra opened her mouth to answer...but then a Champion she had no wish to see entered and very rudely interrupted their conversation.

"POTTER, YOU CHEATER-"

"Silencio!" Alexandra cast instinctively. "Ah, but it's the fourth and most useless Champion of our school! Montague...if you don't control your mouth, I will make sure you won't live to see the Fourth Task, am I clear?"

**6 January 1995, Judge's Deliberation Room, somewhere under the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

The room had been used by the Judges yesterday.

As Iztli Yupanqui, known to many souls as Knight Diplomat, was aware there were no plans to use it today.

Unfortunately, reality, and the Champions who lived in it, had a frequent tendency to break the best plans ever made by bright and old minds.

The current Supreme Priestess of the Incan Solar Dominion sipped some milk while attentively watching the nine other Judges present.

All had been as astonished and surprised during the Task as she was, but after a couple of hours of Tournament violence and spectacular shenanigans plus some time to drink a heavy alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverage, the majority had regained their wits.

This was...both good and bad. The King had given her orders, and some of them might go against the majority of the Judges' wishes.

"I want to begin this reunion," Judge Konstantinos Hippasos of the Ministry of Greece declared without formality, "by saying this has been the most blatant and large-scale cheating I've ever witnessed in my life!"

"Is it really cheating in plenty of cases?" Felix Norris intervened with a frown. The Australian wizard had a concerned expression on his tanned face. "I shared with you some days ago my belief that we were making this Task too difficult. It was a mistake to-"

"The challenge should have pushed the Champions to surpass themselves and uphold our most optimistic expectations!" Ernesto Fernandes of the Ministry of Brazil answered in an angry outburst.

Iztli was not the only Judge to look at the Herbology Master with some disbelief.

"Well, the 'should' didn't happen, did it?" the two millennia-old Dark Witch who had bathed in the blood of the conquistadors replied politely. "The difficulty of the Task, as our colleague indeed warned us, pushed the Champions to interpret the rules as if they were obstacles to be evaded, be it clever interpretations or outright mystification."

This wasn't enough for Ernesto Fernandes, alas. Like the majority of men, when his pride was involved, the stupidity has such an unbreakable hold in his head it took a long time for reason to come back.

"This is not-"

"They won, Judge Fernandez," the only vampire of the ten Judges revealed his long and pointed teeth. Yet the expression was strangely amusing, as with everything Grigore Sturdza did. The retired Quidditch player of Transylvania was very charismatic.

"They?" Mohammed ben Qassim spoke with a touch of humour in his coarse voice. "I was rather under the impression we should use *she*."

Iztli nodded, along with six other male and female Judges.

Only an imbecile would refuse to acknowledge that the Third Task had been dominated from the first second to the end by the actions of a single female Champion.

"She cheated." Fernandez growled.

"She won," Salimata Mema, flamboyant as always even by the standards of the Mali delegation, "I for one applause-"

"Damn it!" Konstantinos raged. "Do you want her illegal constructions of trebuchets to be repeated every time the rules are too restraining in Champion Potter's opinion?"

The Ancient Incan witch didn't enjoy where the arguments of the opposition were going.

"May I remind you, Judge Hippasos, that the use of trebuchets during the next Task will be ridiculously difficult and will ensure that any Champion trying it will be sued for the massive collateral damage?"

"I completely agree with Judge Yupanqui," the venerable Hanayo Komachi intervened with his polite and unchanging soft voice, "the use of trebuchets and other siege engines of medieval times for the next Tasks will not only be incredibly difficult, it will be counter-productive. We will ban their use nevertheless, but our oath-sworn role is to be fair, and in this case, I will be among those who will admit we were outmanoeuvred by a young Champion. We were overconfident. Do not blame the otter when its nature commands it to find new bountiful shores."

"Fine," the representative of the Greek Ministry deflated like a hot air-filled balloon, his wrath vanishing spectacularly fast. "But while the rule interpretation of Champion Potter can be interpreted as a mistake on our part, there was none in Champion Longbottom's case."

"Dumbledore's protégé tested negative to Felix Felicis mere minutes after the Task."

Iztli knew what had happened of course; it was not the first time she saw Fate ruin the outcome of an important event which should have been a one-sided Light defeat.

But in this instance, keeping her apparent impartiality was more important than satisfying her revenge.

"Please!" Judge Varga snorted. "Hogwarts' Headmaster studied under Flamel. Now that the old Alchemist is no more, there is no risk to his own aura if he uses some secret his teacher left behind."

"This might be what happened..." the corpse-skinned Grigore Sturdza quickly amended his words when he saw the expressions of disbelief, "fine, it is certainly what happened. But if the tests are not positive, it's not cheating. The rules are incredibly strict about this point, I'm afraid."

"But in that case, we must-"

"Let's not be too hasty," Felix Norris said with a roguish smile. "Aren't the two Champions we have just spoken about the 'Task winners'? We can keep them for the end and adjust their scores compared to the rest."

"An excellent idea!" Konstantinos Hippasos approved before his eyes became particularly vicious. "Let's start with the first Champion to be eliminated...a certain Champion Graham Montague."

For the first time, the tenth Judge, Ayla of the Red Sands, representative of the Ottoman Sultanate, stirred herself.

"Zero."

Iztli Yupanqui cleared her throat. The girl definitely had a point, the performance of Voldemort's lackey was a total disgrace.

"Zero."

**6 January 1995, Champion's Lodge, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

The Dark Queen was the last to enter the Champion's lodge.

Okay, that was not completely true.

Loki's Champion was only the fourteenth Champion to arrive, but the last two were not likely to make an appearance.

Boris Viipuri, by the latest rumours, had not been seen since he was escorted to the Infirmary Wing with one missing arm. And while Armand Coularé de Lafontaine had seemingly been in good health while he was eliminated, poisoned white fumes from the Dark Queen's 'Weir Potion' had apparently caused sufficient damage to send him to the same location after the first challenge phase.

So yes, there were only fourteen Champions left. But nearly miraculously, no one had died during the Third Task.

Alexandra didn't know if she had to be relieved or disappointed. On the one hand, she didn't really want neutral Champions to die. On the other hand, there was Graham Montague...

"You don't have a draconic handbag by your side," Lucrezia Sforza reacted after the lodge was completely silent for ten long seconds.

"That jade-scaled reptile made sure I fell into a pool of mud!" The Fenrir Animagus gritted her teeth very loudly. "And then when I jumped out of it, it scurried through a tunnel and slammed enchanted gates in my face!"

Alexandra nodded approvingly.

When it came down to it, it was the smartest thing the talkative dragon could have done; with how little space there was to move underneath the arena, it would have been only a question of time before Fenrir's fangs closed around his or her throat – Alexandra thought the Chinese-born dragon was male, but she wasn't completely certain about it.

"You were lucky," the Champion of Lust grinned.

"It is the reptile who was fortunate!" the Champion of Chaos growled before emptying half of a bottle of liquor in a glass which was certainly made to contain orange juice, not whiskey or whatever the Russian Champion was about to drink.

"Really? There could have been metal spikes below, you know...and yes, though you would have likely survived, the mastery of certain elements combined with Alchemy can create tombs where an uninvited guest's stay can be...eternal."

The Potter Heiress had to fight the instinctive reaction she felt at those words, which was to make a worried grimace.

As far as menaces and threats went, this one was not particularly subtle.

That was not to say it would not have been efficient, unfortunately.

Alexandra hadn't perceived the first thing about an underground trap waiting under the throne room, but if the daughter of the Scuola Regina's Headmistress was ready to insinuate it was there, it must be true. There was no point in lying, not when any Champion would likely be able to sneak through during the celebrations of the evening and verify by himself or herself.

And assuming it was true, it was a very bad way to die. Legendary Animagus or not, being entombed in a stone prison whose walls were specifically enchanted to make sure you didn't break out, while impaled by spikes or whatever poisoned blades the Exchequer had on hand did not sound pleasant.

Alexandra was pretty sure that if it was her caught in this trap, she would take years to die...so yeah, best to avoid this fate at all costs.

"Then why didn't your allies do it?" Frode Falk's face was nearly impossible to see given how much orange-coloured ointment the Healers had coated it with, but he looked relatively fine otherwise, and he probably had recovered, since he was here and not with Viipuri on a hospital bed. "You would have done a favour to this world."

Lucrezia Sforza's amusement vanished faster than you could say 'Tournament'.

"Why didn't you try to kill her, Champion of Failures?" the Venetian Champion asked back with a scornful expression. "Or are we supposed to think your pathetic attempt at using Tartarus Venom while she had her back turned was a real assassination attempt?"

"That was really pathetic," Romeo Malatesti agreed, his transformation into a duck a thing of the past. "Are you sure you are a *true* Champion?"

"Shut up, Lord of Ducks!"

Lyudmila Romanov coughed loudly before drinking a significant quantity of alcohol.

The Champion of Ares' eyes flashed a metallic yellow, but there was no explosion of violence.

Instead the tall and muscular Champion barked.

"Did you need your Archmage to give you a parchment with the speech, or are you able to imagine a few repartees yourself?" It was obviously a rhetorical question, because Romeo Malatesti continued, not giving Frode Falk the time to give an answer. "And though I may have been temporarily transformed into a duck, at least I fought my enemies with my weapons in hand and I looked them in the eyes. I certainly didn't try to push someone into a lake of destructive Potions."

"This is not-"

"Shut up, Falk," Eleonora da Riva was emotionless...or filled with hatred, given the cold tone, it was one or the other. Alexandra was ready to bet on the latter, to be honest.

One thing was evident, the Champion of Innocence had never spoken like that in public before.

"It was an accident-"

"I said shut up!" the brown-haired female Champion icily ordered. "I don't want to hear your lies again."

Frode Falk stopped talking, proving that for all his foolishness, he had at least a tiny shard of self-preservation somewhere inside his soul...a pity it was a very tiny shard, and that he almost never used it when it was important. Seriously, managing to trigger lethal threats from Dark and Light Champions on the same day?

It wasn't an impossible scenario, but it really took a gift to be that hated...

No Champion dared talk for a good minute.

When someone cleared his throat, it was, to Alexandra's surprise, Neville Longbottom who did it.

"Err...does someone know why the Judges are taking so much time?"

"Because Champion Potter demolished the grading method they wanted to use to determine winners and losers of this Task?" Viktor Krum suggested in a very sarcastic and Bulgarian-accented French.

"I prefer to think it is because so few Champions touched the thrones," the Champion of Ravenclaw tried to present innocent eyes to the world.

"Ha!" Romeo Malatesti didn't believe it, clearly.

"Our trebuchet-mistress might be onto something," Lucrezia Sforza intervened, and the Champion of Venus was greeted by a few expressions of disbelief. "Oh, the Judges certainly expected at least half of us to not reach the throne room, but they certainly didn't expect only two to formally succeed."

"Two or ten, what does it change?" Ambre de Courtois asked. "There were two thrones. They have one Champion for each. They can assign the rest of the Champions to one side or the other, it's not that complicated!"

"Somehow," the Succubus gave them all a predatory smile, "I don't think it is *that* simple."

**6 January 1995, Judge's Deliberation Room, under the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

"How do we choose the Champion who leads the Court of the Doge?"

Salimata Mema's question ignored the pretences everything was fine and went straight to the heart of the problem.

Because yes, the Champions of the Tournament were supposed to be divided into three Courts for the Fourth Task.

It had been supposed to be a surprise, only to be revealed when a third Champion would get past the Guardian of Jade and climb up the final stairs.

But the destructive fight between Loki's Chosen and her draconic opponent had made sure there was no one to touch the third throne...sun and abyss, there were very people outside of this room who knew there was a third throne in the first place!

"The simplest solution," Grigore Sturdza began, in a voice which let everyone prepare for the bad news, "is to nominate the Champion who was the closest to the thrones when we officially ended the Third Task."

"Out of the question," Iztli Yupanqui replied immediately. Even if she hadn't been Knight Diplomat of the Exchequer, the Incan witch would have been utterly aghast at the idea of the Tsar's Heiress being in control of a Court. Since she was aware of what the King intended to do next month, the millennia-old witch pretending to be a mere spell-researcher was not going to nominate this arrogant child.

Before the first twenty-four hours of the Task were over, the city would be in flames, one way or another. And more problematic, the plan would be utterly ruined.

"I agree with my fellow Judge," Enikö Varga went on to support her, "we want a contest and a long Task. We want a prestigious carnival where the public is satisfied and the Champions can compete with each other. Nominating Champion Lyudmila Romanov to be the Head of the Doge Court would guarantee a slaughterhouse in the short-term, not a mix of festivities and competition."

"But in that case, how will we choose the Champion? We can't let the participants decide for themselves, after all!"

All heads turned towards Konstantinos Hippasos...and grew thoughtful expressions.

"We can," Felix Norris countered, "as long as they don't know what we let them choose about."

"That can work only once," Mohammed ben Qassim warned them. "How will we decide who is part of the Day and Night Courts? By the eternal sands, do we keep the Courts as they were intended? The equilibrium was already fragile and terribly against the Night Court as it was, we-"

"Yes," Iztli commanded. The Moroccan wizard raised plenty of good points, and any other time she would have enjoyed letting him do his job. But there was more at stake than he knew, and the imbalance was part of the plan. "The Courts are kept as they are. Three Champions for the Court of the Doge, seven for the Day, and six for the Night."

"With only four Artificers and ten Agents, the Night is going to lose, I'm sure you are aware." Hanayo Komachi commented politely. "I will be the first to acknowledge wisdom and proper strategy can outplay numbers and power, but the Task's rules and victory conditions do not favour the Night at all."

This was indeed a good summary of the situation.

"Then let the Champions volunteer by themselves," the Transylvanian vampire suggested before she could suggest a variation of that idea. "They are going to spend the carnival, fifteen entire days together, right? If they must be part of a Court and compete with their fellow Champions, let it be their choice..."

"This is a horrible idea," Ernesto Fernandez grumbled. "Weren't you listening when Judge Komachi said the rules were against the Night Court? I'm sure that before the sun set down, the Day Court will have its seven Champions and more will clamour to be part of it, number limits or not! Unless the Champions prefer to swear themselves to the new 'Doge', that is!"

"If it happens, it happens," Ayla of the Red Sands remarked with the voice of a Seer, "but let us see first how the Champions are going to react. Give them one week. They might surprise you."

"If you say so," rarely had Iztli heard a more unconvinced voice. "Is it your decision to go ahead with this idea, my fellow Judges?"

There was no open disagreement, though some amendments to details had to be made, and promises for contingencies.

"In that case," the Brazilian wizard sighed, "we might as well return to the Coliseum over our heads and summon the Champions."

**6 January 1995, the Coliseum, Magical Republic of Venice**

Good news: the wait was over.

Bad news: the ten Judges looked far too pleased with themselves.

At least, nine of them were, it was difficult to evaluate if the tenth Judge, the Ottoman representative, was pleased or not, since her face was hidden behind a red veil.

Alexandra sighed but stepped forwards into the arena where the 'Citadel' had been built. After one hour of waiting, the numerous wizards and witches had already deconstructed several major sections of the Outer Wall, and if a large intact Gate remained, it was more for photographic purposes as the Champions were told to line up with their back nearly leaning against it.

The enchanted armours, obviously, were nowhere in sight. It would have likely ruined a bit the ambiance if someone took a massive scorpion bolt or dozens of arrows in one's flesh while the Judges spoke.

"After long deliberations, we have arrived to near-unanimous conclusions where the scores of the Champions are concerned," Judge Felix Norris began. "Since the majority of the Champions completely ignored certain rules or did their best to interpret them in manners not suitable for the pre-Task evaluation system, there have been major point deductions."

It wasn't exactly a surprise. Alexandra had known her trebuchets were not rule-abiding material.

"Now for the scoring. First, Champion Graham Montague."

The tens of thousands of spectators chose this moment to make their opinion known, and it wasn't complimentary at all. In fact, there were a lot of insults.

"For a performance which was calamitous by any standard, we give no point."

The green-eyed Ravenclaw had to cough loudly to not burst into laughter. Okay, in hindsight, it was way funnier than having the Junior Death Eater dead and gone. Two Tasks and not a single point, it had to be some kind of historical Tournament achievement...

"Champion Boris Viipuri had good intentions, but was too easily distracted. And he failed to understand the danger represented by an instable Potion at a critical time. For this, we estimate his performance is worth two points."

That was harsh, but not surprising. Anyway, the Durmstrang Champion was likely out of the Tournament. Losing an arm was no joke.

"Champion Lucas Gauthier was closer to brewing an impressive Potion, but was also distracted at a critical time. When the instability of his brewing was evident, he took appropriate measures and avoided grave injuries. We reward him with four points."

The Beauxbatons Champion saluted, and for the first time, there were cheers and applause coming from the stands. In the end, Lucas Gauthier looked more relieved than truly disappointed. Though it raised the question where his magical specialty laid; the older French teenager had been a participant for the three Tasks, and he had excelled in none of them.

"Champions Giovanni Ruspoli, Armand Coularé de Lafontaine, and Ambre de Courtois managed to brew an Alchemical reagent-based Potion. However, while their brewing competency proved adequate, the Potions by themselves were not judicious choices, and they failed the first challenge phase. We give them respectively ten, twelve, and fifteen points."

And inversely Giovanni Ruspoli's success in the Second Task looked to have been a fluke, a consequence of him being a Rune Specialist, or the result of the Exchequer's help. Or the three options at the same time.

"Champion Romeo Malatesti successfully brewed the Rage's Thirst and the Philtre of Undying Hatred, but was unable to use the latter in a skilled manner, and fell easily in a trap of Champion Romanov during the second challenge phase. We give him twenty-four points for his efforts."

The Champion of Ares had once more justified his brutish reputation...but a few thousand spectators seemed to love it. Alexandra certainly didn't.

"Champion Viktor Krum, after brewing the Hawk's Charge and the Eagle's Claws, chose to forfeit during the third brewing phase. Since he completed two challenges in an efficient but slow manner, we give him thirty points."

That was...not a lot. The first Champions, Alexandra had expected low scores, but Malatesti and Krum had not been stopped at the first obstacle, and Krum had even reached the 'Potion moats'.

Damn. How low was her score going to be?

"Champion Eleonora da Riva successfully brewed two Potions, but did not brew anything we could identify in the third stage, and was through no fault of her own eliminated during the third challenge phase. We reward her with thirty-four points."

That Frode Falk's name had not been announced first was a gross injustice. Yes, it was his fault, thank you so much, eighty thousand pairs of eyes had noticed it. Why was there-

"Champion Frode Falk used skilfully the Norse Tunnel-Builder to bypass the defences of the Citadel and the Visions of the Well to navigate through the Labyrinth of Mirrors. However, his actions during the third challenge phase and the fourth brewing phase were particularly bloody and unnecessary. We imposed a ten points-penalty on him, giving him a total of thirty-five points."

Well, if the bastard wasn't heavily punished, he wasn't exactly rewarded either. As it was the first task he was participating, his score was going to remain incredibly low until the next month.

Alexandra followed only with one ear the explanations for the next Champions. Yeah, they were from Hogwarts, had brewed successfully two Potions – though in Longbottom's case, they were of the copy-thievery type...and they got deductions because they had asked for her help.

"Champion Cedric Diggory is given thirty-seven points."

"Champion Neville Longbottom is given forty points...and the title of King of the Day Court."

Naturally, the whispers were uncountable and generated plenty of buzzing in the stands.

Yeah, that was definitely going to be important for the Fourth Task.

"Champion Lyudmila Romanov." The Dark Queen stepped forwards, absolutely unrepentant. "Though you brewed three perfect Potions, earning yourself twenty points for each, you received a demerit of five points for each as they are on the Unforgivable List..."

The speech of the Judges was then a long list of impressive bonuses, which were immediately removed with an equally impressive series of demerits.

"And to challenge a dragon, unsuccessfully with your Animagus form, was extremely poor judgement from you, removing five points from your score. Therefore, in unanimous accord, the ten Judges give you a score of forty-two points."

By contrast, Lucrezia Sforza was a far more 'regular' affair.

She had brewed two good Potions, all of them easily Mastery-level – which confirmed her boasts of being a prodigy in Potions – and had not spent one hour breaking or skirting around the Tournament's rules.

However...

"For an incomprehensible forfeit when you clearly had the skills to continue, Champion, we remove thirty points from your total ranking, giving you a final score of forty-four points."

Only forty-four? Wow, Lucrezia was second, if the grading curve was confirmed, and they had not yet reached the fifty threshold. Talk about a massacre of points executed by the Judges...

"Champion Alexandra Potter."

The Ravenclaw Champion stepped forwards. The crowd grew silent, except a few acclamations from Hogwarts' section.

"Your interpretation of the Third Task's rules, is some of the most egregious attempt to leave your opponents in the dust, and you did it thrice!" There was no need to have a deep imagination to think Judge Felix Norris was restraining himself from rolling his eyes. "But the Judges, at the near-unanimity, have acknowledged your preparations and your brewing phases, as unconventional as they were, obeyed the instructions to the letter, despite ignoring the spirit of them."

Alexandra smiled politely.

"It must also be acknowledged your choice of Potions, during each challenge phase, was particularly inspired. And in the fourth brewing phase, you confirmed your talent in the field of Potions. Given the circumstances, it has been decided to only enforce a removal of sixty points for the continued use of three trebuchets during the Task, the limited magical structure of the siege engines in question, and the help provided to your fellow Champions while you had clearly left the arena limits. Added to the ten points of your first place, the significant bonuses of the fourth phase, and the records set by bypassing the first three phases...we reward you with fifty points...the first place of the Third Task...and the title of Queen of the Night Court."

The Coliseum exploded in thunderous applause, and Alexandra raised her hands to celebrate.

She had done it!

Long hours during night time where she could have relaxed and done more enjoyable things, countless sessions wondering how a trebuchet worked...it was all worth it.

She had won the Task...despite having in all likelihood a far smaller arsenal of Alchemical Potions than all Champions save those of Hogwarts.

The magical mirrors broadcasted the list of scores just announced, along with something which brought a nervous chuckle: for this Task, Hogwarts had gotten a better score than the other schools! In Potions! That had to be the irony of the millennium!

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**European Magical Tournament Individual Rankings of the Third Task:**

**1st: Alexandra Potter – 50 points**

**2nd: Lucrezia Sforza – 44 points**

**3rd: Lyudmila Romanov – 42 points**

**4th: Neville Longbottom – 40 points**

**5th: Cedric Diggory – 37 points**

**6th: Henri de Condé – 36 points**

**7th: Frode Falk – 35 points**

**8th: Eleonora da Riva – 34 points**

**9th: Viktor Krum – 30 points**

**10th: Romeo Malatesti – 24 points**

**11th: Ambre de Courtois – 15 points**

**12th: Armand Coularé de Lafontaine – 12 points**

**13th: Giovanni Ruspoli – 10 points**

**14th: Lucas Gauthier – 4 points**

**15th: Boris Viipuri – 2 points**

**16th: Graham Montague – 0 point**

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**European Magical Tournament School Rankings of the Third Task:**

**1st: Hogwarts – 127 points**

**2nd: Scuola Regina – 112 points**

**3rd: Durmstrang – 109 points**

**4th: Beauxbatons – 67 points**

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Albus Dumbledore didn't know if he had to cheer with the crowd or sob tearfully.

Hogwarts had won its first Task as a school. And this despite the fact one of his Champions had finished dead last.

This should be plenty of reason to celebrate.

But for now, it left a really bad taste in his mouth.

Impressive performance or not, young Cedric and Neville had finished respectively fourth and fifth...and earned incredibly low amounts of points, especially compared to the first two Tasks.

Where previously being in the top five had given opportunities to score sixty to seventy points, here the quasi-totality of the Champions were stuck at thirty-plus or forty.

"The Champions who entered the Tournament after the first two Tasks are going to suffer major problems trying to catch up with the first-chosen Champions." The Headmaster of Hogwarts commented for the other Heads of Schools' ears, as the Judges distributed some sort of parchment to every Champion, likely a clause of some kind to not break the rules again like it had been done during the Third Task.

In the meanwhile, papers were summoned in front of Karkaroff and Maxime, likely to tell them to select a replacement each for the Champions who had been wounded.

The drawback of these events was, of course, that it was the Succubus who answered his analysis.

"It depends how the next Tasks will be judged, I suppose...and how many points it will be possible for a talented wizard or witch to earn in each event."

"Some Champions should forfeit no matter what the next Tasks are about," Karkaroff sent back in direction of the Judges whatever he had signed, and returned to his absolutely toxic behaviour. "Many students have proved they were absolutely useless in Potions and Runes. Do they really deserve to be called magical practitioners after proving their incompetence?"

"There is more to magic than Runes and Potions, Karkaroff," Maxime corrected him without any trace of respect or courtesy in her voice.

"And except your foremost Champion," the Venetian Headmistress added her own dose of venom, "Durmstrang has not exactly proved skilled to the point of crushing academically or magically its opponents in this Task or the previous one."

"This is because Dumbledore's brat broke the rules and the Judges let her get away with it," the former Death Eater was prompt to shift the blame away.

"The Judges did not-"

"How interesting you feel that-"

"AHEM!" The magical voice of Judge Norris interrupted what promised to be a particularly unpleasant conversation. "THE PODIUM CEREMONY WILL BEGIN IN A MOMENT, BUT FIRST, PLEASE, WE REQUEST EVERYONE'S ATTENTION, FOR SOME IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT THE FOURTH TASK MUST BE REVEALED."

As was completely predictable, the thunderous roars which had engulfed the Coliseum since the rankings were announced significantly decreased both in numbers and intensity.

Thus when the Australian Judge resumed speaking, it was in an amplified but relatively 'normal' voice.

"Before we begin, the issue of substitutes to replace the Champions must be discussed. For reasons which will become clear later, the Judges have unanimously decided a Champion must be completely healthy to prepare for the Task ahead. Asking an already wounded Champion to catch up, while already unable to complete his or her own preparations, would be dishonesty on our part. By this logic, we are forced to conclude neither Champion Boris Viipuri nor Champion Armand Coularé de Lafontaine will participate in the Fourth Task."

There were some angry shouts, but the crowd stayed relatively silent.

"By their own High Master and Headmistress's choice, they will be replaced respectively by Champion Yegor Poliakov and Champion Fleur Delacour."

Two magical Champions in a single-

Albus was not particularly trying to sense foreign magic, but he felt the hot pyre that was Ra's magic burn in satisfaction not far from him.

The Defeater of Grindelwald didn't share this joy at all. Save two Champions of the Light – and one had died, and his successor was unrecognised for now – this meant the majority of the Golden Mages and the Black Wizards and Witches were involved...in a Task which had all the signs of a gigantic trap.

"Now this Fourth Task is going to be...unique."

Several Judges cast some spells which were a long series of Charms and Transfiguration, and under the Champions' and the Judges' feet, the machinery of the Coliseum rumbled to life.

The former Supreme Mugwump had expected a podium or something similar.

Instead, three thrones emerged from the depths hidden under the Roman-style arena.

And yes, there were *three* thrones.

The first, who was from his perspective to the left, was the luminous and golden throne young Neville had touched.

The second, a Dark Throne if there ever was one, looking like it was forged in some realm where everything was obscurity, had been touched by James Potter's spawn.

But the third between those two royal seats...no one had seen the ocean-coloured throne before it rose in the last seconds.

There was no doubt in the Hogwarts Headmaster's mind that, if the first two thrones had been linked to the Light and the Darkness, this one was associated with the sea. Seashells and algae had been sculpted along with fishes and the well-known symbol of a trident, and the very stone had been enchanted to present various shades of sea to his old wizard's eyes.

"It will be unique, for it won't be an individual competition, or a challenge placing four schools in direct confrontation with each other."

Albus gritted his teeth. With one of Hogwarts' Champions declared King and Queen of each court, he had feared something like that was coming, but it was not pleasant to hear it confirmed.

"It will be a game between three Courts: the Day, the Night, and the Court of the Doge."

The Doge? But it was the name of the ruler of Venice while...oh, no, surely they wouldn't dare-

"After compiling the choice of the Champions themselves," several wizards, including young Cedric and Neville, suddenly showed very astonished expressions, meaning the parchments had not presented it that way, "Champion Romeo Malatesti has been nominated to be the Doge of the third Court!"

"And I accept the nomination!" the Black wizard thunderously proclaimed, arrogance and power lust shining in each and every move he made.

This was bad. This was really, really bad. Out of three, they had two Champions of the Dark on two different thrones.

This was all he could think about as young Neville and the Ravenclaw Champion were escorted by the Judges to sit upon their respective thrones, while Ares' butcher was already basking upon the sea throne.

"Now let's not keep our spectators and our Champions waiting for a minute longer...the Fourth Task will take place in Old Venice itself next month, and it will be...the Carnival Civil War!"

More than sixty thousand throats screamed their joy and manifested their happiness in the more sonorous methods they could create, be it by wand or hand.

Albus stayed silent and motionless.

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The 'Throne of the Night Court' was very uncomfortable.

Alexandra was ready to swear her magic on that.

Yet this lack of comfort was nothing compared to the Judges' recent revelation.

Of course there were going to be three sides during the Fourth Task.

The Powers forbid they did something simple with two sides.

The worst part was that it really made sense, if you considered the long war the Army of Light and the Exchequer had been waging for millennia.

The Day Court was supposed to represent the followers of Ra, obviously, while the Night Court was a not-subtle metaphor for the Exchequer.

And the Doge...the Court of the Doge was a representation of the ICW, or all the Ministries in the world, trying to live and survive while the two Avatars vied for supremacy over the magical world.

It made sense.

Alexandra didn't like it at all.

To begin with, she had the ugly premonition that 'Old Venice' really referred to *non-magical Venice*, not the islands where wizards and witches lived in secret.

"Since the Carnival will take place in Old Venice itself, strict measures and regulations will be enforced, for the Statute of Secrecy must not be endangered."

This was a joke, right? If the Statute survived this Task, Alexandra was ready to eat the Kraken of the Black Lake...tentacles first.

"The Task will begin at the same time the Carnival does. It will end with it...provided a Court has not been declared victorious before that moment."

That...that was insane. Her magical guardian had informed her – and Alexandra had checked once to be sure – the Venetian Carnival was a *fifteen days-long* affair! They were supposed to fight and compete against the two other Courts for the better part of two weeks?

This was...yes...completely crazy!

One glance at the two other 'Kings', and yeah, Neville Longbottom and Romeo Malatesti were as surprised as she was...though the Champion of Ares recovered fast, and bared his teeth, visibly appreciating the challenge.

"The victory conditions, naturally, will be different for each Court." Thousands of spectators, needless to say, loved the drama and were already wondering in excited whispers where to buy the tickets and wondering if they could take holidays to watch the Fourth Task. Evidently, it wasn't they who were going to participate...

"The Day Court, in order to emerge victorious, must defeat the vile conspiracy of the Night Court. This involves capturing the Night Queen or a majority of her Champions, and preventing them from recovering the Aquamarine Keys the Night Court is charged with gathering in order to usher in a new age of Eternal Darkness. While the Night Court can't arrest the Day Court, only resist arrest, the Day Court can be imprisoned on the command of the Doge. The Day King mustn't be arrested by the Court of the Supreme Lord of Venice. Being withdrawn due to injuries or perishing will also be grounds for the Judges to declare the defeat of his Court."

Why did Alexandra have the feeling the Day Court had the easy goals for this Task?

"The Night Court's victory conditions are more complicated." Called it. "In order to win, the leader of the Night Court has to avoid capture both from the Doge and the Day. Her neutralisation or arrest, no matter the circumstances, will be instantaneous grounds for the defeat of her Court. In addition, the arrest of a majority of the Night Champions, that is four out of six, will result in an early disqualification. If the Night is to win, they must avoid their fiercest supporters being captured or withdrawn from the game."

There was a moment of silence.

"The Night Court must recover all the Aquamarine Keys, in order to force the Day and Doge Courts to concede defeat."

Yes, unfair didn't begin to cover it. Somehow, the green-eyed Ravenclaw witch didn't believe for a second it was only two or three keys which would have to be recovered. Not when the Carnival lasted for fifteen bloody days.

Naturally, after that, the Doge's goals were rather simple: arrest the Day King and the Night Queen. Romeo Malatesti didn't even need to arrest most of the Night Court, just one person – who happened to be Alexandra – was enough. Well, he had to do it 'before their vile or noble plots were successful', but still.

Speaking in practical terms, it was strange, because if the Exchequer wanted to represent the struggle between Light and Dark faithfully, the Doge Court shouldn't have that easy a time...

"For the next week, the Kings and Queen of the Court will have the obligation to recruit their Champions for the Task waiting for them. They will not have the choice of numbers, however. The Day Court must have seven Champions. The Night Court will have six. And the Doge Court will have three."

There were a lot of protestations coming from the stands after that revelation was made. The Judges ignored them. They feigned to not see the grimace on Malatesti's face too. Yeah, suddenly the Doge Court had become way, way weaker than the two others. It wouldn't be easy running after Day and Night when you had a smaller force under your command.

"To become part of a Court, a Champion has to petition the King or the Queen of said Court in public, which you might understand as in the presence of at least one Judge, and the King or the Queen has to formally accept. Non-respect of these conditions will result in the invalidity of the membership. And we will warn you beforehand: once the pact is sealed, no Champion will leave the Court before the end of the Task...he or she will part of the Court...for the best and for the worst."

The Potter Heiress could begin to feel there were going to be some unpleasant moments, yes.

"This process must be completed in one week, unless the Court wishes to take severe point penalties," they were informed. "Once it is done, and only then, the Kings and Queen will be informed of the effectives they will be able to recruit as Artificers, Warlocks, and Guards of their Court."

That was...interesting. Maybe she could hire Fred and George as her Artificers? If only there wasn't the feeling Neville and his court were going to outnumber her in that category too...

"The complete list of rules, limitations, festivities, and privileges given to the Courts will be revealed three hours before the beginning of the Fourth Task. With two exceptions."

An onyx key which had a big shining diamond embedded in its handle was presented on a black pillow before making its way to the feet of her throne.

At the same time, a golden key with a seemingly identical diamond was levitated to the feet of the Day Throne.

"As Champion Alexandra Potter touched one of the thrones first, her key will open a Tournament Clue containing the full instructions for the Carnival Civil War to come. That is, if she manages to find the container this key opens, which has been hidden somewhere within the boundaries of Old Venice."

Of course, it would have been too simple for them to hand over the instructions...keys in the Clue, keys in the Fourth Task itself. This Fourth Task was really going to be about keys...it had been a while since she hadn't practised *Alohomora*.

"Champion Neville Longbottom, being the second to touch a throne, will receive the majority of the instructions, but not all of them, assuming once again he finds his Tournament Clue before the Carnival begins."

Alexandra wanted to ask a lot of questions...but looking at Felix Norris and the nine other Judges, it was incredibly obvious the answers wouldn't come.

The information would be revealed when they wished it...or when she recovered the Tournament Clue, whenever this hypothetical 'victory' happened.

Hells, there was the question of if she wanted to win that Task. There was no doubt this was the trap of the Exchequer, or at least a very big part of the great whole destined to vanquish the Light permanently.

What was she supposed to do?

"And now that we have stimulated your interests in adventure and mystery, the podium ceremony for the Third Task can begin!"

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And to think that yesterday, Neville had dreamed of being part of the Task's podium ceremony.

Merlin's pants, okay, he had dreamed of being on the highest spot of the podium, not just being part of the ceremony.

And in his dreams, there had been an enormous cup, bigger than the Quidditch House Cup the teams played for every year.

Instead, the Boy-Who-Lived got *that*.

"For his remarkable performance, Champion Neville Longbottom receives five books of the Potion's Almanac collection, three standard Apprentice-level cauldrons, and the elite Potion Champion's kit!"

Neville thanked the female Judge hidden behind strange red robes, and saluted the spectators.

Most cheered and applauded politely.

It helped the Gryffindor Champion not to feel too disappointed.

Potion books. Potion cauldrons. Potion ingredients. One or two Alchemical reagents. Potion tools, including spoons, knives, a balance, and some other stuff Snape had not taught him how to use.

If the word 'Potion' didn't begin to be sung in your head...

Neville breathed out.

All of this stuff was really valuable, no doubt.

But it was *Potions*.

The future Lord Longbottom swore he was going to do his best, but even if they promised him a million Galleons, he may not find it in him to love the class...Merlin's beard, liking it when it was a Slytherin teaching it might be way over what he could promise.

"What beautiful Potion books," he told Diggory as he returned to his starting position next to the older Hufflepuff Champion. "They really went with the full Potion theme..."

Diggory smiled before rolling his eyes.

"We all know Alchemical reagents are very expensive. I'm really surprised they included one or two for each Champion."

"Those are class-1 reagents," Neville quipped.

"Class-1 reagents are still worth the equivalent of a full wardrobe of average Potion ingredients."

"True," the young Gryffindor Champion acknowledged. "But they aren't offering any animal to the winner today."

"What did you think they were going to offer, out of curiosity? The only animal of importance I saw today, if I don't count Granger's cat salivating at the sight of my breakfast, was the Jade Dragon. And they aren't going to offer it to anyone...I think Potter and Romanov would team up to murder it if the Judges dared rewarding them with it."

Neville chuckled.

"Yeah, you're right."

Several Judges and their assistants cast Levitation Charms, and the Dark Queen of Durmstrang received her Potion books, ingredients, and tools. Aside from an increase in quantity, there was really nothing to be jealous of...which was a relief, because Neville wasn't going to demand reparations from the female psychopath which had nearly transformed one-fourth of the Task into a garden of nightmares.

And besides, the Russian pureblood already looked disappointed. Whether it was from not having killed the dragon or 'only' taking the third place on the podium, Neville didn't know, and he wasn't about to ask.

"You're the leader of one of the three armies for the Carnival Task."

"Repeating what is completely obvious? Yes, I am. And I'm grateful I touched the 'Day Throne'. The game is really...err...the rules are definitely against the Night Court."

And in the middle of a city, the obligation to respect the Statute of Secrecy meant there was little risk of a Dark Champion changing into his or her Animagus form, unless he or she could convince the Muggles this was absolutely normal.

Yeah, the huge and nasty displays of magic would be impossible for the powerful monsters.

"I think it's going to be the Light against the Dark...except the Dark will be divided between the Courts of the Doge and the Night."

"Yes," Cedric approved. "With Malatesti and Potter in charge of each Court, you will be able to have the Champions you want."

Before them, Lucrezia Sforza received her books and three small vials of Alchemical reagents. The gifted cauldrons were bigger too...and Neville absolutely didn't care.

"Is it a hint you want to be part of the Day Court, oh Hufflepuff Champion?"

"Well," the older Hogwarts student made a slight grimace, "I will check the rules, but yeah, I would prefer be on your side. I don't want to call Malatesti my 'Doge' or whatever that bloodthirsty Champion will call himself, not after seeing how he tried to kill Geoffrey. And Potter is going to lose this time. She has raw power, but she won't be able to use it...and I doubt she visited Venice even once before this year."

"That's definitely something I didn't think about until now," Neville admitted. "Fortunately, there are many Champions on our side who did."

Thank Merlin for that, because of the four Champions of the Scuola Regina, Malatesti and Sforza certainly had visited the Fourth Task's 'arena'...Morgana's curses, for all he knew, they had bought houses there!

"And last but not least..."

The drums rolled, the orchestra played a tune of victory, and the Judges advanced to reward Alexandra Potter, who had now won two Tasks out of three...which was two more than practically everyone involved in that Tournament. And the one she hadn't won, she had finished second.

Yeah, he was beginning to see why Fred and George had been so ecstatic about their gambling business last time he had seen them before today...

"Wow, they offered her another 'Egg of Cleopatra'?"

There was an impressive gift of books first, but yes, the golden hue, the shape, and the gems were quite unmistakable.

Aside from one detail...this time, the egg had no crocodile theme, but a draconic one. And where there was no gold, the colouration was clearly jade or emerald.

"This reward I would love to get," the Boy-Who-Lived told the Hufflepuff as the entire Coliseum cheered for the Ravenclaw Black Witch. "It's gold, emerald and jade. If I came back with that, my grandmother might have to acknowledge me as a grown man..."

"Yes," Cedric grew thoughtful for a few seconds, before shaking his head, "I would love to have one too. But to do that, we have to win a Task. And we were very, very far from that today."

"Why do you have to demolish my dreams with this reasonable argument?" the black-haired Gryffindor joked.

Because Cedric was right. From the very moment they had been escorted into the Coliseum, neither he nor the Champion of Hufflepuff had really been in the podium race. Potter had left them one hour behind her. In the case she had been disqualified for her trebuchet use...it was likely Romanov or Sforza would have won, and the Hogwarts duo would have been stuck at the third brewing phase.

"Sorry."

"Oh, that's okay...I knew we were not going to win this one." Ultimately, Neville was not that disappointed by his score. Twenty-four hours ago, he would have signed for that sort of result, and looked at his future-self like one looked at a moron because he was disappointed. "I suppose we will have to play politics during the next buffet among other things...with the Court stuff and all those things the Judge have hinted about."

"Yes, politics...but the Task is over."

"Yes, thank Merlin's staff, it's over..."

**6 January 1995, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

"Night Queen...the power has finally gone to your head, then?"

Alexandra glared at Morag's disrespectful expression.

"I see that if there were some doubts I was going to receive the royal respect my august station deserves, the last minute has laid them to rest."

And for those who were unable to understand the context, no, her friends weren't going to do the kowtows and the reverences unless they wanted to copy the Weasley Twins.

Speaking of which...

"Bow before her Most Tenebrous Majesty!"

"Prostrate yourself before the Queen of All Night!"

"Stop your ridiculous proclamations, minions, or I'm immediately going to ask the Judges if they have sent back the Hetkoshu crocodiles to the Egyptian preserve. Something tells me the hungry reptiles wouldn't say no to a couple of red-haired steaks."

"Yes, your Tenebrous Majesty! We bow to your tyrannical will!"

Alexandra hissed between her teeth, before adopting an expression of suffering.

"Why did I think it was a good idea to win this Task again?" the Potter Heiress complained loudly.

"Because you wanted an Egg of Cleopatra for yourself?" Susan suggested, taking her right hand in hers. "Congratulations on the acquisition, by the way."

"Thank you," a kiss on the lips accompanied those words, for compliments from her girlfriend had to be rewarded...and the green-eyed Champion ignored the whistles of certain parties. "And yes, that sounds like a good reason."

"You got a lot of Potion books," Hermione, incorrigible librarian, pointed out with the grouchy fur ball known as Crookshanks in her arms. The cat had tried to invite itself to the Champion buffet, and right now, was still eying the delicacies when he thought Alexandra and Hermione weren't looking at him.

"Hermione, I got the cauldrons, the books, the ingredients, the brewing tools, and practically everything related to it...which is nice, I suppose," the Potter Heiress conceded. "Some of the books look quite rare and expensive, and between everything I was rewarded with, I don't think I will need to purchase a lot of things related directly or indirectly to Potions in the next two years, unless I really need reagents or extremely specific ingredients."

Alexandra smiled while one of her hands was in Susan's long red hair.

"That said, I could have bought them myself...eventually. This is a nice reward, but I'm not going to jump in joy for twenty-hours because of it."

"At least you think it is a nice gift," Lyre replied, before handing Susan and she two glasses of fresh fruit juice. "Looking at Longbottom and a few others, I think they were struggling to not look sick."

Alexandra raised an eyebrow.

"I thought it was because he was nominated to lead a Court, despite having done little to earn the honour."

The saddest part was that the Ravenclaw Champion was not joking. Now that the enchanted images replayed the main events of the Third Task around them, Alexandra had a better idea of what each Champion had done...and the Gryffindor Champion hadn't exactly covered himself in glory.

It was true the Boy-Who-Lived had done far better than his Potion skills should have allowed him to reach, but a good part of his success lied in the help given by others, and Alexandra's own contribution hadn't been minor. Without her, Neville Longbottom would have been eliminated during the third brewing phase, that much wasn't in question. And if the cauldrons of other Champions had been off-limits, the thief-type Potions would have been useless.

And the less said about what had happened in the fourth challenge phase, the better. No one had told her so, but Alexandra knew instinctively relying on your Patron Power like the Gryffindor Champion did was, in general, the first step to an early grave.

"I don't know," Susan mused, as Hannah came back with some snacks, including the delicious mini-pizzas they had grown so fond of in the previous Tasks' celebrations. "He got the best part of the deal, no? The rules were clearly made to advantage the Day Court."

"The rules can say all they want. During the Task, it will be Champions who will compete."

That Longbottom was a Light Champion and likely going to lead others like Frode Falk was problematic, but in the crowds of the Venetian Carnival, the ability to sense if a Champion of the Dark or the Light was nearby would hardly be as efficient as it was in a normal environment.

"And honestly, I'm hesitant to say who has a serious advantage...because knowing the Judges, we don't know a tenth of the subtleties and secondary rules of this Task."

Before saying the Doge Court was only granted three Champions, Malatesti seemed to have the advantage...after it, not so much. The right to arrest everyone from the Day and Night Courts obviously wasn't that good if you didn't have the resources to do it...though once again, it was best to stay prudent.

The Judges had not said so in their words, but the hints were clear: they didn't want overwhelming magical attacks for the Fourth Task. No, they wanted subtlety, illusions, and dissimulation in plain sight.

Alexandra was honest enough to admit deep inside it wasn't exactly where she thrived.

But the 'King of Gryffindors' Longbottom wasn't exactly the poster boy of Slytherin cunning.

"He may not be the best Champion for a Carnival Task," Morag acknowledged, "but he has already recruited the first Champions for his Court. Henri de Condé and Lucas Gauthier pledged their wands to his Court not twenty minutes ago, and by Cho's own admission, Diggory is likely to do it tomorrow."

Alexandra drank slowly her fruit juice before answering.

"Disappointing...at least where Condé is concerned."

Hermione giggled.

"See, Morag? I told you it wasn't going to trouble her!"

"Yeah, yeah...care to explain to the poor peasants why, your Tenebrous Majesty?"

Alexandra snorted. Before establishing themselves as one of the powerhouses of Ireland, the House of MacDougal had been first-tier Scottish Barons. Their lineage had never been anywhere near the peasantry.

"I don't know much about Gauthier, but for now, as a Beauxbatons Champion his deeds are singularly unimpressive. I'm willing to grant that with the Fourth Task's rules, he will be much more dangerous, but he has never manifested the ability to cast powerful illusions or some sneaky enchantments. And Cedric...well, no offence to Cho's boyfriend, but he's a Hufflepuff to the core. His fair-play and generalist talents aren't going to dominate a carnival-type battlefield. No, Henri de Condé is the most dangerous of the three recruits...though I'm really surprised by something, I must admit."

"Oh, and what it is, Alexandra?" Hannah Abbot asked.

"The hastiness our dear Boy-Who-lived chooses his Court," the Champion of the Morrigan replied very seriously.

"You have only one week to select your Court," Susan's friend said hesitantly.

"There's a difference between a few hours and a week of reflexion," the MacDougal Heiress countered, showing evidently that she had understood the point she was making. "Alexandra and all the Champions are just out of the Task, marching with the laurels of victory or the cauldrons of defeat. The great 'King of the Day Court' may have given some thought to who he wanted in his Court in the last minutes, like I'm sure our new great and terrible Night Queen did, but essentially he's recruiting everyone who asked him to join."

"That's what I wanted to say, yes," the daughter of House Potter agreed.

Finding the Tournament Clue in Venice was priority one, two, and three for the next month, but based on the previous experiences and the sadism of the Judges, it wasn't going to be easy. Meaning Alexandra really needed someone who knew the sea-built city like his or her pocket. In addition to this, it was good to have Champions in top physical shape by her side.

With one of the primordial rules being to respect the Statute, there was going to be a lot of running and arduous physical activities.

Cedric Diggory may be a good asset in that regard, but the Ravenclaw Champion didn't know him enough to know what he did outside of Quidditch. Besides kissing and doing a lot of adult stuff with Cho Chang, of course.

"Anyway," Fred made a remarked come back – his twin's fired new explosions into the sky may have something to do with it, "let's celebrate the second Task-victory of our magnificent Dark Lady! To the terrifying Night Queen Alexandra Potter!"

"To Alexandra!" The other traitors toasted before most tried not to die of laughter or from their uncontrollable giggling.

"A speech!"

"I will all have your heads by tomorrow! High treason will never prosper!"

"See? One minute on a throne, and she's already suffering from megalomania fever!"

Alexandra had a feeling she was going to hear it quite often until the Carnival...and depending on the outcome of the Fourth Task, the jokes may stay for several months after that.

She wasn't going to thank the Exchequer for that.

"People are betting on the next outrageous thing you will do, your Tenebrous Majesty," one of the red-haired pranksters informed her with a smile that was as large as Crookshanks – the cat was devouring some mouse-shaped sweet. "After the trebuchets, business is booming!"

"Glad to hear it," Alexandra rolled her eyes. "What is the top contender, for the sake of my personal curiosity?"

"That you will smuggle an army into Venice by Muggle submarine, of course!"

Alexandra gaped for three seconds before closing her mouth.

"Well...I can definitely say I had not thought of that..."

"Does it mean we are doing it, oh great Dark Lady?"

"No," Alexandra huffed before letting herself fall upon a chair. With winter conditions outside, the buffet and the Task celebrations were in the halls of the Scuola Regina, not in the gardens, and it definitely had its advantages. "Of course we aren't doing that. In fact, given how the Judges penalized me sixty points despite technically respecting the rules, I think we will need to be careful with what we do during the next Task."

Surviving remained her chief goal, but Alexandra had no wish to imitate Montague and earn a zero. It would be...humiliating.

There was some agitation in the distance, and Nigel and Luna, already receiving interviews, went on to investigate. Hermione disappeared too, likely to congratulate Viktor Krum...and Alexandra had to give two interviews to Italian-speaking journalists. The joys of celebrity and winning the Task were truly countless...

When it was over and as she devoured her third tartlet, Eleonora da Riva emerged from the mass of thousands of partying wizards and witches.

And she didn't look at happy at all.

No, that was inaccurate. On the scale of anger, from zero being 'perfectly calm' and ten 'I'm about to kill you', the nine threshold had been broken through minutes ago.

"I was about to offer my felicitations that you survived relatively uninjured in the end, Champion da Riva, but I have a feeling you aren't here for that."

Alexandra was on her guard, nonetheless. Innocence was not the most destructive Light Power in existence, but Eleonora remained a powerful Light Champion, more powerful than Longbottom would be for years.

"He chose *him*." The hatred was such Alexandra's fingers clenched around her wand.

"Err...excuse me?"

"Longbottom! Falk asked him to be part of his court...and the 'Day King' accepted!"

"Oh," that was all the reaction she could make as the thoughts fought in her head. One prominent was that the Gryffindor was really losing no time at all. Was he trying to fill his Court before night was over?

"Yes, oh," the Venetian witch seethed, "he chose him. As if the last hours were of no consequence. As if...as if..."

"That's weird, even for Longbottom," Alexandra admitted. "Wait a minute. Didn't our Headmaster try to discourage him?"

"Your Headmaster wasn't anywhere nearby...*but the Archmage was*."

The Champion of the Morrigan sighed. Of course. And Longbottom was nowhere near ready to fight off the sick influence Ra had over the Light. Add the fact Henri de Condé and a few 'reasonable figures' might not have been in the vicinity, and Frode Falk was part of the Light...

"He chose *him*."

"I understood by the second time, don't worry," Alexandra stood and Susan returned her glass...completely empty. Fortunately, a nod to a nearby butler, and this problem was corrected. "And you have my sympathy. The Archmage undoubtedly wants all Champions," the Light ones, she wasn't going to say out loud, "to make common cause."

"Well, he won't," the brown-haired Champion of Innocence hotly retorted.

"Excuse me?" She must have heard incorrectly. Because the alternative was-

Eleonora da Riva bent the knee, and the gigantic hall they were **in** went progressively silent.

"I am Champion Eleonora da Riva," the older witch said in a loud voice which certainly attracted the attention of several Judges discussing not twenty metres away. "I desire to pledge my wand and my magic to the cause of the Night Court."

That...that Alexandra hadn't seen coming.

This was...completely unanticipated. And-

No, she had to focus.

Eleonora da Riva was from Venice, and though Alexandra remembered Stella Zabini saying they didn't have palaces inside non-magical Venice, there was a good chance the Champion of Innocence regularly visited it.

And as far as Light-Dark antagonism went, she was one of the few who was tolerable and tolerant, and her being accepted would not cause recruitment problems...quite unlike the one of Falk did.

It could have sealed the deal by itself.

But Alexandra was vindictive enough to say it was the expression of shock on certain Light leaders' faces not metres away from her which was the final deciding factor.

"I, Champion Alexandra Potter, am happy to welcome you among the ranks of the Night Court, Champion Eleonora da Riva."

\*\*\*\*

As the one-way mirror offered plenty of security, due to its formidable enchantments, Morgane saw no reason not to repress her hilarity.

The legendary sorceress laughed for a long time, for all the fact the Champion of Innocence had stopped bending the knee many seconds ago and the horrified expressions of the Light fools had faded away.

It didn't matter. The former Champion of the Morrigan would remember both the former and the latter until her last breath.

A door opened behind her. Morgane didn't turn her head. There were only two beings who could enter this secret room, and Angelica Sforza was too busy flirting with several wizards next to the school orchestra.

"**If I had not sworn to not thank Ra for anything until the Dark is victorious**," Osiris began, "**I would do it now. His blind favouritism of Frode Falk handed us a formidable victory...and we didn't have to lift a finger to make it happen**."

"Indeed," Morgane approved. "Personally, I thought it would take one or two days during the Fourth Task to fracture the Light's unity in a decisive manner. It is incredibly interesting to see this goal already achieved as the Carnival's opening ceremony is still over a month away."

"**Interesting, yes**," Osiris confirmed with a tone of satisfaction. There was a pause. "**But it comes with its own challenges. We predicted that Ra would be able to convince all the Light Champions currently in a state to compete to rally the Day Court. It is clear this is not going to happen now. And with this reality, we have new challenges coming to the fore**."

"True," Morgana licked her lips. "I think Alexandra Potter has a good idea of what we intend to do during this Fourth Task. She's a remarkably intelligent young girl, and though the rules were left deliberately incomplete, she must have a very good idea of our plan's foundations."

"**Yes**," her King mused after only the briefest moments to assimilate her judgement, "**and you think she will refuse to play her role**?"

"It's nearly certain by now," the ancient female vampire nodded. "The Third Task has proven beyond doubt Alexandra Potter is not above imitating Loki's Chosen and throwing plenty of chaos into the Tournament's foundations when the victory conditions are unfavourable to her. The presence of Innocence by her side will increase, not decrease this motivation. My successor in the heart of the Morrigan may understand our goals. She may secretly wish for some of them to come into existence. But if we let things stand as they are, I think this year's *Mardi Gras* will be a catastrophe both for Ra's and our ambitions."

Osiris stayed silent for several minutes, only watching thoughtfully the hall where the Champions and the majority of the Scuola Regina partied.

"**Very well**," the Avatar of Darkness acknowledged. "**There's a reason we prepared many contingencies for this Task. And**," the twin brother of Ra grunted, "**since I let the Champion of Loki live, it is highly likely she will join the Night Court, no**?"

Morgane Rys'Ygraine Avalon didn't need to breathe and at this moment she didn't feel the need to imitate human habits.

"Yes. I don't see her making a curtsy to the Champion of War," as for the Champion of Fate, even for a bad joke, the prospect would be disgusting for any self-respecting Champion of the Dark. "Of course, we will know more after the next week shapes the three Courts."

"**In that case, I think it is time you have a frank conversation with your prospective Apprentice, my Queen**," the former Champion of Death knew the King of the Exchequer enough to know it wasn't a suggestion. "**Take Lucrezia Sforza with you**."

"By your magic and your will, it will be done," the Queen of the Exchequer murmured.

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**Champion Rankings of the European Magical Tournament after the Third Task:**

**1st: Alexandra Potter – 225 points**

**2nd: Lyudmila Romanov – 219 points**

**3rd: Lucrezia Sforza – 195 points**

**4th: Henri de Condé – 134 points**

**5th: Eleonora da Riva – 127 points**

**6th: Romeo Malatesti – 119 points**

**7th: Cedric Diggory – 107 points**

**8th: Viktor Krum – 99 points**

**9th: Ambre de Courtois – 82 points**

**10th: Giovanni Ruspoli – 65 points**

**11th: Neville Longbottom – 40 points**

**12th: Geoffrey Hooper – 39 points**

**13th: Frode Falk – 35 points**

**14th: Armand Coularé de Lafontaine – 24 points**

**15th: Lucas Gauthier – 19 points**

**16th: Boris Viipuri – 11 points**

**17th: Fleur Delacour – 10 points**

**18th: Karl Schumacher – 3 points (deceased)**

**19th ex-aequo: Graham Montague (not deceased yet), Lorenzo de Medici, Cassius Warrington, and Pyotr Karamnov (all deceased) – 0 Point**

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**School Rankings of the European Magical Tournament after the Third Task:**

**1st: Scuola Regina – 506 points**

**2nd: Hogwarts – 411 points**

**3rd: Durmstrang – 367 points**

**4th: Beauxbatons – 269 points**

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**Author's note**: It took two chapters and far more words than should be reasonable, but the Third Task is finally over! Hurrah! Next Task, Venice itself, for once we're not going to see Champions die or lose their minds on the sands of the arena...

And the next chapter’s title is *The Death of Innocence*.

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