**Chapter 99**

**The Lions of Venice**

**14 January 1995, Venice, Italy**

Once the pizzas were all eaten, Morag was the first one to return to the problem which had dominated their conversations for the better part of the morning.

“Can I look back at the enigma you were given, Alex?”

“Sure,” the green-eyed Ravenclaw replied, handing the MacDougal Heiress the piece of parchment where she had copied the words. “I can pretty much recite it in my sleep anyway.”

“Prove it,” Hermione said.

Alexandra rolled her eyes.

“To find what you seek, you must first be guided to the true lion. Then when his claws turn crimson, witness the courage of the ancient times. Walk where no Champion wants to rest. At the end of the path, remember that a key can open more than a door.”

“Impressive,” Nigel said.

“No, not really. We’re supposed to memorise plenty of theory for our Transfiguration exams, a short enigma isn’t that a big deal,” Alexandra watched her friends one by one before grimacing. “Of course, repeating the information I was given isn’t much help by itself. The Tournament Clue is what is needed. And so far, our efforts this morning to find it have been...lacklustre, shall we say?”

“The adjective is appropriate,” Hermione approved. “I really thought the cells of the Doge Palace were a good location to begin our searches...it is certainly a place where ‘no Champion wants to rest’.”

“It was way too evident,” Morag grinned. “Remember this, my dear Granger: the Judges don’t offer free knowledge.”

“You were the first to run to the lions guarding the entrance of the Arsenal,” Alexandra reminded her, prompting an amused cough from Nigel.

“Yes,” the unrepentant redhead retorted, “but the ‘lion’ is supposed to be the easiest part of the enigma to find.”

Alexandra snorted, imitated by Hermione and Nigel seconds after.

“I have a lot of doubts with your theory, Morag.”

“Based on what?”

“Based on the fact that at every corner of the islands Venice was built upon, leonine statues, paintings, and various lion-themed items are found everywhere.”

Alexandra wished she was exaggerating, but alas she wasn’t.

“Alex is right.” Hermione voiced her support after a brief moment of silence.

“Of course she is,” Nigel said. “For all we know, this city was founded by a group of secret Gryffindors.”

“Well,” Morag took a thought full expression, “when you think about it, a winged lion is not so dissimilar to the emblem of Godric’s House. And building a city on a bunch of islands where life was immensely difficult in medieval times is exactly something a predecessor of hot-headed wizards professing to be chivalrous would do.”

Alexandra scratched her head. The worst part of that entire argument was that it made perfect sense.

“I can’t say you’re wrong, Morag. Still, assuming we had found something ‘between the claws of one of the Arsenal’s lions’...what was the plan?”

“Well, I think we would have had to wait for dawn or sunset, or cast a spell imitating the red light of those natural phenomena...and then we would have the red light illuminate a very old monument which would be our next destination.”

“That...could be right.” Hermione cleared her throat after speaking. “The Arsenal’s lions didn’t work, but the rest of it could be the right direction.”

“Yes, but it requires the non-trivial challenge of finding the ‘good lion’.” Alexandra did not pour any enthusiasm in her voice. “And we have only two indications: we must be ‘guided to it’, and it is the ‘true one’. I read some books on the traditions and customs of Magical Venice, and I found literally nothing about it.”

“It can be the lions atop the columns we saw on Piazza di San Marco.”

“Good one, Nigel,” Morag chuckled. “Assuming it is them, how would Alexandra climb to the top of the column without breaking the Statute of Secrecy? January is a month where Venice isn’t exactly crowded, but there are always enough people to notice someone doing something absolutely forbidden.”

“There may be another option,” Hermione seemed to have considered an idea which didn’t please her. “I don’t like him, but Longbottom got his ‘key-enigma’ too. And with the Court he has, the Army of Light and the other groups of Light fanatics are going to help him. We could try to spy upon his Court and him when they visit the city.”

“I’m afraid it won’t work.” Alexandra shook her head. “Personally, I didn’t think about it, but Cedric is way too noble and thought there could be some cooperation between our two Courts.”

“Sometimes, the loyalty of Hufflepuff is extremely naive,” Morag approved. “So?”

“I recited the first verse of my enigma, and Cedric recited what Longbottom got.” The Champion of the Morrigan gave her friends an ironic expression. “Apparently, our Tournament Clues are in very different locations...or at least can only be traced by wildly different enigmas.”

“Ah, damn,” the MacDougal Heiress commented. “And the great ‘King of the Day Court’ will certainly have fewer difficulties finding what he seeks.”

“I don’t know. Unlike me, he doesn’t search for a lion. Instead, the Judges sent him after a ‘golden book’. Given how large and ancient the libraries of Venice are...”

“Yeah, it isn’t that easier.”

The Exiled looked at each other. Truly this time, there was no outstanding solution after exchanging their ideas.

“We’re going to spend our afternoon examining lion after lion, aren’t we?”

“I’m afraid, my dear Granger, that you have summed up accurately our problem...”

“Okay, but you pay for the dessert first!”

“A hard bargain,” Morag cheekily remarked.

“One I will have to tolerate, for the good of my realm,” the Champion of House Ravenclaw groaned theatrically.

**14 January 1995, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Daphne Greengrass did her best to maintain a dignified expression as they left the Great Hall.

The Slytherin pureblood had a reputation to maintain, after all, and the Champion by her side was likely going to curse her if she made an ironic comment about the ‘reception committee’.

“Well,” Alexandra Potter said as they began to climb up the stairs, “I’m beginning to remember fondly the times where everyone ignored me and I could cross the Great Hall without being assaulted by dozens of young wizards and witches eager for my autograph.”

“True, you are famous now.” Daphne pointed out.

“Ha. Ha. Your sense of humour is extraordinary, Daphne.” The green-eyed Ravenclaw sighed loudly. “At least it was only autographs this time.”

“You had an excellent idea to establish the selection process for this Task, in that regard. Otherwise, I guarantee you would have been under attack before placing one of your boots on the entrance’s marble stairs.”

“I have no difficulty believing it.” The Ravenclaw Champion replied. “It’s not related in any way to what we’re discussing, but is there a reason why Snape looked so peeved today?”

“Oh, it isn’t something that began today. Our dear Potions Master was...a bit miffed by Montague’s performance during the Third Task, shall we say? Something about managing to beat the most pessimistic bets everyone at Hogwarts had expected of the Slytherin Champion.”

Daphne said it with an unhidden gleeful tone. In two Tasks and as many ridiculous performances, Montague had finished ruining whatever influence and prestige the ‘Junior Death Eater’ movement still possessed inside Slytherin’s House.

“Should I expect our dear Professor to come in person to poison the imbecile during the Fourth Task?” Alexandra Potter asked sarcastically.

“I think it should be seriously considered,” Daphne smiled. “The replacement can’t exactly do worse than him, after all.”

A chuckle escaped the throat of the powerful teenage witch.

“I am not sure about that...not because I think Montague is anything but a fool, mind you. But at least this Junior Death Eater is an incompetent fifth-year with a magical core of a sixth year. Theodore Nott who is supposed to replace him is definitely a fourth year...and I wasn’t impressed by his academic and non-academic performances.”

“True,” the Greengrass Heiress conceded. “I suppose we’re going to know fast enough. Montague isn’t likely to survive the Fourth Task, no?”

“I wouldn’t bet a Sickle on him surviving the first twenty-four hours. I don’t have any reason to tell the other Champions of the Night Court to spare him, and even his own ‘allies’ of the Day Court may stab him in the back the moment the opportunity is given.”

That was anything but a surprise. And no, Daphne didn’t intervene to say they needed the last accomplice of the deceased Cassius Warrington alive. While in a normal situation, it would be best to avoid creating a martyr for the Death Eater cause, Montague had proven so useless during the Second and Third Tasks that no sane or insane leader would want to use him as an example...except of course to show how overconfidence and nullity could combine into a perfect disaster...twice.

“I wouldn’t bet on him surviving either.” Daphne cleared her throat. “I applied for the position of Artificer, just so you aren’t surprised.”

The black-haired Ravenclaw raised an eyebrow.

“May I ask why? The crafting of artefacts or other magical creations is definitely not right up your alley.”

“You’re right.” Daphne admitted bluntly. “But that’s the only Court role my parents will allow me to apply for. They want a living Heiress at the end of a Task, not a corpse.”

Alexandra Potter grimaced...but didn’t answer high and loud that her parents were wrong.

“I can understand their point of view.” If that wasn’t saying something about how much danger there was going to be during this Task, nothing would. “But I will warn you that with your talents, the odds are extremely low I will select you. All Court roles are going to be subjected to hard negotiations between the five Night Champions and myself, but the Artificers’ selection is going to be even more elitist than the Warlocks’ and the Guards’ added together.”

“I know.” Unlike many wizards and witches of Hogwarts who had thought Alexandra’s decree of ‘apply only to the Night Court or suffer the consequences’ was a bluff, the Slytherin blonde had believed her from the very beginning. “And it’s fine. I won’t be sorrowful if I’m not selected. However,” the Greengrass Heiress raised her voice as they went through a corridor where there were no paintings to overhear their conversation, “I fully expect to be invited as a spectator.”

“You will be.” It was not an oath, but given how good Alexandra was at respecting her promises, Daphne knew this was as good as carved in the marble. “Though there will be favours to be repaid and all of that.”

“The spectators, for all the Judges’ affirmations they mustn’t take part in the Fourth Task, are definitely not silent.”

They weren’t going to participate in the challenges which awaited the Champions, or fight rapier duels in the streets. But they could prove a redoubtable resource to acquire critical pieces of information that the Champions themselves had no time to hunt for.

“Exactly.” They finally arrived to the room where Daphne had stored the parchments, and the Slytherin fourth-year designated the first pile of thirty-plus documents that had been placed on the table. “Those are the applications which, as far as I know, obeyed the instructions you relayed to me.”

“As far as you know?”

Daphne huffed.

“Checking if someone really intends to honour the pledge of not applying for another Court is a bit difficult when they have yet to sign a magical contract. Longbottom and his Day Court have yet to honour Hogwarts of his presence. We haven’t seen Dumbledore either since the Third Task, for that matter.”

“It’s possible he went to his office and returned to the Scuola Regina without you being aware of it.” The Potter Heiress said in a neutral voice. “I don’t like the man, but he has a Phoenix. He can do intercontinental travel when and where he wishes.”

“Maybe,” Daphne agreed before pushing ahead. “But as far as we are concerned, this doesn’t change anything.”

“And also explains in part why I am so popular those days, being the only Champion who frequently visits Hogwarts.”

The Greengrass heiress simply nodded. It was a reason, though by no means the only one.

“Fine.” Alexandra Potter said curtly. “Thanks for the good work, Daphne. I presume the humongous super-pile on my right is the rest of the people’s applications which didn’t obey my instructions?”

“Yes. Several Gryffindors of course disregarded everything you said and applied for Warlock, Guard, and Artificer. Several Slytherin’s parchments delivered bribery attempts instead of telling why you should hire them in a magical contest. Many Hufflepuffs hinted you should give them a chance because your girlfriend is one of them. And plenty of Ravenclaws wrote whole essays about esoteric magics they may or may not have mastered within the next twenty months.”

“Awesome,” the green-eyed witch whispered with a hiss. “Really awesome. Those were basic instructions, and yet the majority is unable to obey them.”

Daphne made a silent gesture of ‘don’t blame the messenger’, and Alexandra shrugged after a couple of seconds.

“Should I burn them?”

“As much as I want you to...” the Champion of House Ravenclaw grimaced. “It would be best for you to use it as a foundation for the ‘spectator list’ I will need in the coming days. Costumes for a Venetian Carnival aren’t made in a day, and it would be best if after the meetings with the other Champions, the number of spies we negotiated with could be paired with names of Hogwarts students we trust.”

“Certainly.” The Slytherin pureblood agreed. “Although I will warn you some students, unlike me, didn’t get the approval of their parents to be part of your Court.”

“But they will definitely be glad to receive one formal invitation, is it what you imply?”

“Yes.”

Alexandra watched the ceiling for a brief moment in deep thought before making a slight hiss.

“Very well. Request Lyre and Ginny’s help to write the list. Try to include students from every House. I know we won’t be able to content everyone, but with the Doge Court not caring about Hogwarts and the Day Court yet to visit, we have an advantage it would be a shame not to exploit.”

“As you say.” Daphne gave her a thin smile.

“Last question for now,” the survivor of three Tournament Tasks said as he began to read the first parchment of the ‘yes’ pile. “Where are the Twins?”

The blonde witch let a sound of exasperation cross her lips.

“Follow our dear Caretaker’s screams?”

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The lair of madness that was the Weasley Twins’ headquarters and production centre must have moved dozens of times since last year until arriving in this seemingly abandoned part of the dungeons.

And with the red-haired pranksters mastering the Space Expansion Charms, free space was clearly not a problem anymore.

But aside from the change in location and size, the room remained quite intimately familiar to Alexandra’s eyes, despite the fact she had never stepped inside it this year.

“But isn’t it our fearsome Night Queen!”

The Hydra Animagus hissed a cursed under her breath. The Judges giving her that title was something she would never forgive them...ever.

“Repeat that and I will change you into a toad.”

“You have mastered the art of human-to-animal Transfiguration?” One of the twins, perhaps George, asked in a tone which raised all kinds of alarms in her head.

“No. But I can learn quite quickly, when I am really motivated.”

“Ah, too bad.” The alarming feeling was quite justified, wasn’t it? “You received our Artificer candidature, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“It isn’t going to cause a problem?”

“Problems?” Alexandra raised both eyebrows and being granted the ‘we are innocent’ looks from the Gryffindors.

“We weren’t able to obtain our parents’ authorisation...and forging a signature won’t work with McGonagall,” the twin who had to be Fred explained.

“Neither did Ginny,” George added. “But it really doesn’t matter-“

“-because she isn’t fourteen until August, and the Judges won’t tolerate that sort of thing.”

Alexandra frowned. Sauron’s dark soul, she hadn’t thought about that!

“We celebrate our seventeenth birthday on the first of April. Until then, we need her approval...there’s no alternative. Our mother was volcanically angry we even considered participating in this Task.”

“That...” something Lady Zabini had told her during one of her lunches several weeks ago flashed back in her head. “That’s not totally exact. I mean, yes, by British law, you need your parents’ authorisation until you are an adult by law. But other countries recognise things like business apprenticeships, trade contracts, or alliances made in the name of profit as exceptions. And said exceptions can ignore temporarily the ‘not an adult’ issue.”

“And Venice is one of those nations?”

“It is,” Alexandra confirmed.

“It sounds a bit too good to be true.” Fred...or George told her. “What’s the catch?”

“Well, you are British.” Alexandra pointed out. “If you want Venetian law to apply to you-“

“We need to gain Venetian citizenship,” George...or Fred finished.

“Yes.” Alexandra’s lips twitched in frustration. “I mean, I’m rather sure a case could be made before a Judge that I have gained the Venetian citizenship, and we are partners in a very profitable business agreement.”

“But you’re not confident it would work,” one of the twins turned back to handle several Potions which were arriving to their brewing’s completion.

“I am confident it would take a long, long time,” the Potter Heiress corrected. “It wouldn’t be cheap, and it would attract the kind of wrong attention neither you nor I want to have upon our heads.”

So far, Dumbledore had remained idle, even after the Third Task, but Alexandra wasn’t counting it would stay that way until the Fourth Task...and certainly not if she began that sort of familial ‘battle’ against the Weasley matriarch.

“And the alternative is quick.”

“House Sforza is wealthier than any British House, and granting you the citizenship is child’s play for them. All that was needed was to convince the Succubus who is part of my Court that you are indispensable, and the Third Task achieved that feat very well.”

The Twins looked at each other silently for several minutes while dealing with the astounding amount of pranking items they were working upon in their atelier-lab.

“We accept,” they declared in perfect synchronisation at last, “but we have a condition.”

“Name it.”

“You give the citizenship to Ginny too.”

That was...not unexpected. It was going to represent...interesting challenges, however.

“Not that I’m saying no, but you realise that I have not the same ties with her that I forged with you? To place her under my authority, I will have to...reveal her as Scylla. Amongst other things.”

It was something that was going to raise hell on the Wizengamot’s floor, even with the support of several key players.

“But you will do it?”

“I will.” Alexandra vowed. “But after the Tournament is over. I have lot of things to juggle with right now...and the political arena may change a lot within the next month or so. I would prefer wait until June before unleashing more political troubles, thank you very much.”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed.”

“By the way, not that it is really my problem, but I heard before coming here your youngest brother already volunteered to be part of the Day Court. And he isn’t exactly talented compared to you two...”

Both twins grimaced at the same moment.

“The dear, precious ‘Ronnie’ is one of the reasons our mother forbid us to participate.”

“Our little brother is not just a moron when he charges ahead, he’s also a substitute and as such he can ignore parental authority to participate in a Task.”

“Convenient,” Alexandra murmured.

“Indeed.”

“Indeed.”

The Champion of the Morrigan tried to think about the implications of Ron Weasley having that kind of authority...before acknowledging they should be minimal. When it came down to it, the youngest Weasley boy was a loudmouth who always spoke before taking the time to think, and anything looking like a subterfuge was anathema to him.

“Now that it dealt with, let’s speak of a more pleasant topic. What pranking items have you thought of that can withstand the ‘Statute of Secrecy’ test?”

**15 January 1995, Ca’Sforza Palace, Venice**

When visiting Venice for the first time, Alexandra had, like plenty of visitors, marvelled at the beauty of the Grand Canal and its palaces.

It had thus been a major surprise to hear Ca’Sforza, where the Champion of Lust had invited the Champions of the Night Court, was not anywhere near it.

After thinking about it, there were plenty of factors which explained it. First, the Sforza witches and wizards were definitely ‘latecomers’ in Venice itself. As a consequence, the Grand Canal’s building emplacements were already extremely limited – to not say non-existent – when they settled here. And it was a problem that apparently gold was not capable of solving. Profit mattered, when it came to the magical and non-magical authorities residing in the palaces of Venice...but prestige mattered a lot more in that particular case, and there was no greater prestige than having your palace’s balcony giving you a Prince’s view of the Grand Canal.

This was far from the only reason, obviously. After the Statute was enforced, House Sforza could have used a variety of magical options to acquire a perfect spot in the water heart of the city.

But it presented some serious drawbacks.

While it was probable that by that time, the Sforza aristocrats had already sided with the Exchequer – a Succubus’ existence was hardly going to be tolerated by Ra and his assassins – the Statute’s enforcers were vigilant, and one could hardly show his or her magical wealth in front of thousands of potential spectators without being immediately noticed.

Therefore where older and far poorer Houses still had a presence on the Grand Canal, Ca’Sforza had been built in the *sestiery* of Castello, the easternmost district of the six Venice possessed.

It had been a rather prescient choice.

Nowadays, Castello was clearly a haven of tranquillity and greenness.

Far from the large Plaza di San Marco and the gargantuan Basilica, the district had accumulated little canals where two gondolas would have difficulty continuing their travel without colliding. Disappeared the modern supermarkets and tourist traps; the entire district seemed to consist of a series of little shops. Most of them had no panels protesting their authenticity. They didn’t need this advertisement, not when the Renaissance and oriental styles coexisted with the carnival masques on the display.

It was completely deserted, but in January, crowds were difficult to find anywhere in Venice. Yet Alexandra was convinced the streets and the canals of Castello would stay that way...until the city welcomed the Carnival, of course.

If she had the time, the Champion of Death would have spent days trying to discover the mysteries of all those little plazas, the surprisingly large parks and avenues of greenness, and tasting the delicacies of every restaurant – Venice had a lot of very, very good food, beginning with the fishes and the pizza.

Alas, it was not to be. Later, maybe...

Ca’Sforza, from the point of view of a non-magical observer, was noticeable, but hardly impressive by the standards of the palace of the city. Its white facade had clearly lost a lot of painting, and the orange bricks which should have been invisible were in evidence. The black iron-wrought rungs on the lower windows added a half-sinister air. And to add one more vibe on the ‘you’re not welcome’ wagon, there was no bridge to access to the door. All the pedestrians could do was admiring the big black door several metres away, because the main street and the palace were completely separated by a canal.

Granted, it was only a small amount of water, the canal was one of those tiny ‘gondola-sized’ streets Alexandra had met by the hundreds during her discovery of Castello.

But it remained a significant obstacle, especially when you were in winter clothes and you didn’t want to attract attention.

Fortunately, Alexandra was invited...and in practical terms, this meant having the password.

“The canal is not the sea. And the city is not the House.”

For five seconds, nothing happened.

Then the black door opened without a sound, and a large man in an exuberant uniform of Napoleon-era style and much azure and gold revealed himself, installing a small metallic footbridge over the canal.

“My thanks,” the Potter Heiress told the door opener after crossing. She received a gesture which might say ‘you’re welcome’, but no speech...and the second gesture was an invitation to continue her progression inside Ca’Sforza.

Which she did, and...

“Wow!”

Alexandra had believed that after every place visited in 1994, it would be nearly impossible to impress her. Before, there had been Zabini Manor, of course. But the Scuola Regina, the Champion’s villa, the Coliseum, and many other splendid infrastructure projects had been so splendid it became honestly difficult to imagine something that would be greater than that.

Now in the entrance hall of Ca’Sforza...no, it was not something as simple as an entrance hall.

It was an ‘entrance garden’.

Now that a white archway and the humble outdated facade were behind her, the palace of House Sforza was revealed in all its magnificence and glory.

There were hundreds of fruit trees, giving the atmosphere a perfume so powerful that the Hydra Animagus was sure the majority of the fruits were magical variants of what billions ate around the world.

Forget the laws which dictated a garden-park so large could not exist within such a small area of space. There were fountains of luscious nymphs linked to irrigation canals, and the water once giving its due to the plants was pouring in artificial cascades. There were small bridges, linked together by small alleys, paved with stones which had a shade between the green and the blue and the appearance of polished marble.

Thanks to Lady Zabini’s lessons, Alexandra recognised the influence of different styles, ranging from the Renaissance, the Venetian Baroque and its Byzantium-inspired elements, to the modern of the Kingdom of Italy and several more modern’s pieces.

And what remained remarkable was that, for all this garden had to cost millions of Galleons – the bronze and marble statues alone were priceless – the atmosphere of the Castello outside remained.

Tranquillity. Serenity. The wind and the water whispered that it was a humble garden spared from the torments of a cruel world...for all the material evidence tended to confirm the opposite idea.

“Enjoying the view?” Lucrezia Sforza’s voice interrupted her thoughts. Her voice was not a seductive purr right now, however; it was barely above a whisper...which seemed incredibly appropriate in such a location.

“Yes.” Alexandra gave a simple nod. Because what else was there to say, really?

“I wish I could give you a full visit, but you are the last one to arrive.”

This was not a reproach; the Ravenclaw Champion had told herself the Succubus that she was going to search for the Tournament Clue before their meeting.

“Everyone?” Alexandra smiled. “No one lost himself or herself in the labyrinth of canals?”

“Everyone,” the Succubus returned the smile. “Even the Dark Queen found my direction instructions impossible to confound for a bad itinerary.”

Before the Fourth Task began, Alexandra knew, she was really to have to find a solution for Chaos and Lust to avoid snapping at each other at the worst moment possible.

But today, the Champion of Ravenclaw hadn’t found that miraculous idea.

“In that case,” the green-eyed witch said lightly, “what kind of Queen would I be to let them waiting?”

**15 January 1995, Ca’Luce Palace, Venice**

Neville had thought that, between the gigantic display of light artefacts and his own position of King, he would have ten minutes to explain his favourite strategy before someone tried to argue.

It was...a mistake.

The atmosphere was extremely tense the moment he walked through the golden doors, and under the crystal chandeliers of Murano, the only Champion who didn’t look distrustful was Cedric.

The Champion of Fate had hoped for ten minutes.

As the events of the next hour would show, Neville wasn’t even granted *ten seconds*.

“Champions of the Day Court-“

“Why are your substitutes here?” Giovanni Ruspoli interrupted him rudely, before glaring at Angelina, Ron, and Leo. “We were in agreement only members of the Day Court should be present to this meeting.”

“They are members of the Day Court now,” Morgana’s magic be damned, this was not how he wanted to begin this Champion’s gathering. “As King-“

“Just because you are the King doesn’t give you the right to fill up the Day Court with your friends!” Montague barked. “What would you have said if I decided to name twenty Slytherins as my Warlocks?”

“Fortunately,” Frode Falk snickered, “your talents are so pathetic the possibility of you becoming a King was always nonexistent. Now please shut up, *failure*, before-“

“How dare you, *backstabber*, talk to me-“

Henri de Condé slammed his hand against the table. Fortunately, the round-shaped furniture was quite solid, in addition of being a marvellous carved piece of wood.

“Stop that. Neville Longbottom has the rules on his side, and bickering won’t solve anything.” For the first time, Neville felt relief and gratitude towards the French Champion.

“However.”

The relief and the gratitude fled on angelic wings as fast as they could.

“There’s such a thing as courtesy to be given to your peers,” the Champion of Horus continued with a disappointed expression, “and I, for one, don’t like to be placed before the *fait accompli*. Which roles did you give them, *your Majesty*?”

“Angelina Johnson will be one of my Warlocks.” Neville answered. “Ron Weasley and Leo Black will be Guards of the Day Court.”

“At least no Artificer seat was lost due to your blatant nepotism,” Giovanni remarked darkly.

“I don’t know if I would call it-“ Cedric began, but was immediately stopped by Falk.

“It is not nepotism. The King is choosing among the loyal substitutes he has at his disposal.”

“Loyalty is good,” Henri de Condé remarked frostily, his blue eyes watching Falk like one observed a dangerous predator, “but we can’t ignore skill in favour of loyalty. Those two Hogwarts students are young-“

“They are basically the same age as the Night Queen, don’t forget.” Lucas Gauthier pointed out.

“Please,” Montague scoffed. “Don’t try to place those two leonine disasters in the same category as Potter. She killed two Basilisks on her own when she was twelve. Neither Black nor Weasley have a tenth of the skill and power she has.”

Many eyes turned towards the Slytherin pureblood, because...well, for the first time, what Montague had said...it was relatively truthful.

“Hey!” Of course Ron and Leo reacted, after realising how insulting the words had been for them.

“Anyway,” Graham Montague ignored completely the outburst of the two Gryffindors. “Whatever the reasoning *your Majesty* used to choose these two clowns, I, a Champion of the Day Court, find myself less than impressed by the choices of the Day King. I suggest vigorously that the method by which the Warlocks, Artificers, and Guards of the Day were chosen to be modified *urgently*.”

“Who are you to disagree-“ Frode Falk began before being interrupted in turn.

“I second this suggestion.” Giovanni Ruspoli said, and Neville winced internally. Ignoring Montague would be one thing, but the moment a second Champion supported his views... “We have been given a massive advantage in numbers of Warlocks over the Night and the Doge Courts. It is not the time and the place to waste it by recruiting the friends one brought to the Tournament-“

“The substitutes have earned their place with the preliminaries,” Neville was forced to remind the Champion of the Scuola Regina.

“Ah yes, the preliminaries,” Montague tried to pour some venom. “You likely pulled the same kind of tricks you used during the Third Task-“

“Montague, shut up.” Cedric told forcefully. “The only reason you got as far as you did during the preliminaries was that all the competent Slytherins saw this bloody Tournament for what it was: an easy way to lose one’s life. And since they had more self-preservation and intelligence than you did, they didn’t participate.”

Watching the Junior Death Eater with his mouth wide open for three or four seconds would be one of those things that made this day almost tolerable.

“Thank you for the intervention, Champion Diggory.” Henri nodded to Cedric. “Now, let’s be honest. We have to establish a coherent strategy, and we have nineteen Warlocks, four Artificers, and eighteen more Guards to recruit before the Carnival begins. Since I don’t think we will be able to recruit much from Durmstrang-“

“On the contrary,” Falk disagreed. “You would be very surprised, de Condé, at how many *proper* wizards are studying in this supposed ‘Bastion of the Dark’. And they will have the motivation. The Chaos bitch who calls herself the daughter of the Tsar has humiliated half of the school during her scholarship. They will thirst for revenge. Give me authority to recruit ten Warlocks, your Majesty-“

“Out of the question!” Giovanni Ruspoli erupted. “We don’t need a band of brutish beasts that we can’t even trust to not bite the hand feeding them! Moreover, this Task is about subtlety and-“

“What do you know about subtlety, Mister the Pyromaniac?” The Champion of Durmstrang snapped back.

“Enough!” Neville shouted before the meeting turned into a complete mess...again. “ENOUGH!”

For the first time since the beginning of this debate, there was indeed silence, only broken by the noises made by the seagulls close to the windows. The palace of Ca’Luce was on the Grand Canal near the incredibly famous Rialto Bridge, but that also meant it was near the fish market...and naturally it attracted the seagulls.

It also meant the Gryffindor Champion had a good view of the grey sky Venice was giving them on this day of January. The fog had covered most of the city in the morning, and Neville should have thought better to think it didn’t announce many problems.

Now, watching the Champions of his Court one by one, the future Lord Longbottom knew that making sure they stayed a Court for thirteen days was going to be a legendary trial by itself.

Save Montague, all those six male Champions had very good reasons to join him.

Unfortunately, and those last minutes had proven it beyond doubt, what one Champion desired to have as part of the Day Court was not necessarily compatible with the wishes of another.

“We aren’t going to achieve anything by insulting each other.” The Day King declared in his most confident voice. “And we are here for several reasons, none of them can be resolved if we spend our time criticising each other. Now we are going to debate politely who is going to be part of the Day Warlocks, the most important role after the Champions. Champion de Condé, the floor is yours.”

“Thank you, my King.” The French Champion made a curt nod. “In priority, I think we need to convince the students of each school who have excellent knowledge of Venice streets and canals...”

**15 January 1995, Ca’Sforza Palace, Venice**

Eleonora da Riva had been right: being invited to Ca’Sforza was something every champion should feel quite honoured to be given the opportunity of.

Past the garden, a hall with a priceless carpet looking quite majestic had been there, and two enormous oil paintings at least a dozen metres in length representing various festivities in Venice were there to impress.

Once Alexandra had finished to marvel, there was-

“Err...are these stairs...made of glass?”

“Enchanted glass, Alexandra,” Lucrezia Sforza, unlike her, had clearly arrived to Venice in magical clothes this afternoon...or she had long changed from her non-magical attire. To go with her blonde-haired and blue-eyed looks, the Champion of Desire had decided to wear an elaborate dress which, as usual for her, showed each and every curve she possessed. “Perfectly safe to walk upon.”

“It’s...” the words failed her a bit, the Champion of the Morrigan admitted deep inside her. The wall next to the stairs? Covered in mirrors? The metal artwork to help you climb the stair? It shone like gold...and it likely was it. The ceiling was painted with some scene representing a Succubus governing royally with a castle of glass at her feet. “It is...”

But the most impressive remained the stairs. It would have already been quite an astonishing thing even if it was made of wood or marble, ‘fit for a Prince’, as over six or seven persons could descend it at the same time without issue...but it was made of glass and shone like diamonds’ radiance had been imbued in them.

“How in the name of all the Powers were you able to acquire that?”

“House Sforza ordered it to a Master Glass Enchanter of Murano in the mid-1960s.” Lucrezia was happy to explain. “The decade had been extremely profitable for our finances, and it was decided we needed something impressive to awe the other Houses. The work took the better part of three years, and the Master Glass Enchanter and his four Apprentices weren’t able to create more nice creations during that time...but I think it was worth it. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” the Potter Heiress had to approve; not doing so would be the height of hypocrisy. “And I suppose they were quite wealthy from the fortune you must have invested in this glass artwork.”

For all the assurance, the stairs were incredibly solid, Alexandra climbed each step as delicately as she could...for all the marvels of magic, it looked surreal.

“Our patronage made sure the atelier of Murano House Sforza had chosen was well-paid for its services...and of course after the other Houses were invited to the inauguration, I’m told they received enough first-rate commands for the next ten years.”

“I would be really interested in visiting the workplaces of these wizards and witches combining glass and magic,” Alexandra said sincerely.

“It would be a pleasure to present them to you, Alexandra.”

After the glass, there was a new antechamber with great Chinese vases of blue-white which were almost as tall as she was.

And then great doors carved exquisitely opened, revealing a meeting room with a large rectangular table, plenty of couches and desks...and of course the other Champions of the Night Court.

“Good afternoon, everyone.” Alexandra greeted them. “I hope I haven’t made you wait too long.”

“Not at all,” the Champion of Innocence was quick to reassure her. “And even if you had, we wouldn’t blame you. I’m sure Lucrezia gave you the long detour by the Ambassador’s Glass Stairs to impress you.”

“You know me too well,” the red-clad Succubus purred. “Does anyone wish for refreshments before we begin?”

“Refreshments, yes” Viktor Krum approved, “we can drink and listen to what my fellow Durmstrang Champion wants to say. I’m told she has a speech planned and everything.”

“Sometimes I wonder why you’re not the Gossip King of Durmstrang, Krum,” the Dark Queen reacted with a sardonic expression.

“I’m not trying to spy upon anybody!” the Bulgarian Seeker protested. “It’s not my fault boys and girls always want to confide their secrets with me. I never ask!”

“Thank whatever is principled you don’t abuse of this...talent,” Ambre de Courtois commented before sitting on one of the green couches facing the hall’s chimney. “Lemon juice for me, please.”

“I will take an orange juice,” Alexandra imitated the French Champion, and the black couch she had chosen was a delight of comfort. “Well, since Champion Romanov wants to speak, let us hear her.”

“Thank you, *your Majesty*,” the Tsar’s daughter gave a mocking bow, “I think we can all agree that the most important part of our Court, if we don’t include the Champions, is going to be our Artificers.”

“Indeed,” Alexandra replied, and four other voices added her voice to hers.

“I won’t disrespect the Warlocks and the Guards,” the Dark Queen of Durmstrang said in what was probably from her part a restrained and humble speech, “but as good as they will be, with the restrictions of the Statute binding us, they won’t be able to fight and get away if the opponents outnumber them more than two-to-one. And with the Guards of the Doge Court being fifty, let’s be no mistake, there will be moments where we may face disastrous challenges outnumbered ten-to-one.”

“We will try to avoid it at all costs,” Eleonora da Riva answered for all the five Champions. “But I suppose you had a far more...specific plan to counter that with Artificers.”

“I do.” Lyudmila Romanov confirmed. “For it to not be any misunderstanding, I propose to use Necromancy on a city’s scale.”

Alexandra blinked. She had thought about the possibility of it, but-

“I thought about it too,” the Potter Heiress chose to admit out loud, “in theory, animated skeletons can hide under the kind of disguises the Venetian Carnival is so famous for. And there are...contingencies we can use to destroy the skeletons if our enemies are able to unveil the trick. Plus of course as long as we stay far away from the manipulation of souls and life-essence, Death will take no umbrage of our activities.”

It would be the height of irony if she, the Night Queen, was forced to slay her own ‘subordinates’ before the Day or Doge Courts could find them in the streets of Venice.

“But there are major obstacles against such a proposal,” the younger Champion in the hall continued after giving a thanks to a Sforza butler who brought the refreshments. “From my expert’s opinion, I know controlling a skeleton in accurate manner is extremely hard. A skilled Necromancer would have no problem shouting ‘kill them all!’ to an army of undead warriors, but for the ‘Civil War’, the influence and control demanded are so high every Necromancer would be lucky to puppet two or three skeletons...if they stay together.”

“And there aren’t that many Necromancers around,” Krum intervened. “Even if we wanted to give them all the Artificers’ position, I’m certain there aren’t ten of them for the four schools. It’s not exactly the most popular elective...even at Durmstrang.”

“You’re right.” The Dark Queen agreed. “But fortunately, we won’t need that many. Roksana has found some...necromantic short-cuts. To increase the numbers one Necromancer can control, all we require are some help in Alchemy and Runes’ specialists.”

Alexandra raised her eyebrows. What did it have to-

Lucrezia Sforza shrugged.

“I’m properly impressed by your ambition, Chaos,” the Succubus said, and for once there was no teasing in her voice, “but those are not common specialities, especially if you need students at Mastery level.”

“I know.” The Tsar’s daughter said with a frown. “But this is a strategy, I feel, which would be able to support what was said in the last week: we recruit the elite of the elite, and we combine everyone’s strength into something greater than the sum of the individual talents.”

“Let’s assume I agree with you,” Alexandra cleared her throat before Lucrezia could object, “what kind of Artificers do you want in your...’ideal Artificer team’?”

“Two Necromancers,” the blonde Russian witch immediately answered, “two Alchemists, two Rune-Masters, two Elementalists, and two Generalists. The Alchemists would have to be to be skilled enough to create substances enhancing physical endurance and immunity to all sorts of rituals, in addition to create Alchemical reagents which can animate necromantic constructs. Rune Masters...or Rune Mistresses...would have to be skilled enough to control high-level Runic arrays and provide magical defences to living Champions and the skeletons.”

“And the Elementalists would be for the control over ice and water, I take it?” Ambre de Courtois asked, and she received a positive answer immediately. “The Generalists would provide all the distractions and be the coordinators, excelling in none of the four other magical specialties, but being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each one.”

For a few seconds, no one spoke.

“That’s a rather sound strategy,” Viktor Krum admitted. “I’m quite certain it was Vulchanova who imagined it,” there was a wolfish rumble heard from a certain direction, but the Quidditch player feigned to pay it no attention, “but we can’t deny its merits. Every duo would have a ‘big project’ – for the Necromancers, preparing an army of skeletons – and the other Artificers help them when the situation demands it.”

“It would indeed be ideal,” Ambre de Courtois approved, “if one Artificer is captured by another Court, that way we have the skills to continue our strategy, the time for our Court to liberate the imprisoned member.”

“But is also very convenient,” Lucrezia Sforza objected acidly, “that your four followers do have exactly the kind of talents needed for such a strategy, no? Vulchanova is a Necromancer. Feuerbach is an Alchemist. The Sverre line is noted to have frequently given birth to strong Ice Elementalists. And Sydorenko is certainly your Rune specialist.”

“Yes,” the Dark Queen bluntly retorted. “And you will note that I have need of ten, Lust...so I am still six short of what I need.”

That, at least, took the wings out of the Succubus...metaphorically speaking.

Still, Alexandra was going to give her a chance to push for her own strategy.

“Champion Sforza. Do you have an alternative to propose?”

“A misdirection game.” The Venetian-born witch said after glaring at the Dark Queen. “I would urge to recruit as many Succubae and Illusion specialists as possible, and we create a game of smoke and mirrors across the entire city.”

“Very risky,” Eleonora grimaced. “At the slightest miscalculation, everything could unravel.”

The Champion of Innocence gave a mocking smile to the other participants.

“I don’t like at all the use in large quantity of necromantic arts, but as long as the skeletons we use have been dead for years and the Alchemy does not rely on human sacrifices, it remains a solution where the Night Court can dictate the conditions of the battlefield to the two other Courts.”

“And it would fit with the new rule the Judges did introduce this morning,” Alexandra nodded. The officials, because they had likely felt the ‘trick’ coming, had told them it was out of the question to parade in a thousand mass-produced costumes. The disguises of each Champion and member of a Court had to be unique. “Yet the Necromancy-empowered servants would not be technically members of our Court...giving us the advantage of surprise...as long as the opposition doesn’t realise what’s going on.”

Granted, whatever skeleton was thrown in the middle of the Carnival would not be able to participate in the ‘Challenges of the Keys’, but there were plenty of surplus tasks where they could prove immensely useful.

“This is going to be an easy selection process, then.” Ambre de Courtois noted. “We will have to review the files of the Artificers’ candidates, but I suppose the two redhead terrors of Hogwarts who helped her Majesty build the trebuchets are the favourites for the role of Generalists?”

“Since you mentioned it,” Alexandra tried very hard not to gloat or sound too satisfied with herself, “yes.”

“And her lover is an aspiring Necromancer,” Lucrezia announced with no modesty at all. “I think she has an Alchemist Apprentice too in her employ.”

“In the latter case, you’re wrong, Lust,” the Champion of Death did her best to not blush...something that was far from easy. “Miss Chang has been given leave for this Task. Cedric Diggory is her boyfriend, and I wasn’t going to put her in a position where she would have to fight against him.”

“A pity,” Krum noted. “But for the Necromancer role?”

“Susan Bones applied to be an Artificer,” Alexandra confirmed, as if she hadn’t seen her Hufflepuff girlfriend write it in her presence. “And I’m afraid that as far as I am concerned, Hogwarts has no other outstanding specialist besides her to propose.”

It was not so bad, for with Durmstrang and the British school having advanced their ‘assets’, this left three empty slots for Beauxbatons and the Scuola Regina. Of course, the Champions of the Venetian and French school were likely going to ask for more ‘seats’ when the Warlocks and Guards were discussed.

“Champion Sforza? The floor is yours.”

**15 January 1995, Ca’Bellicosa Palace, Venice**

The palace of Ca’Bellicosa, Fleur knew, had ceased to be the main residence of House Malatesti in the early twentieth century. It wasn’t because one of their Heads had been assassinated by the Army of Light. No, the successive generations of warmongering maniacs would likely have stayed if this was the problem.

No, the real reason House Malatesti had moved on from Venice was that the warlord of the time had decided to impress his young mistress after participating in a series of trade conflicts in Africa and South America.

And for that, evidently, the old Ca’Bellicosa, built to look like a fortress from the outside, was not suitable. The amorous Dark Wizard had preferred the countryside of Cittadella, north of Padua.

To be honest, the more the Delacour Heiress thought about it, the less there were good things to say about this fortified palace.

For all the warming charms, everything inside created an aura of...barely restrained violence. Some part of her insisted it was only her imagination and the cold atmosphere waiting outside the walls.

Unlike the majority of the thirty greatest families of Venice, House Malatesti had not built its first monument to celebrate its aggrandisement next to the other sumptuous residences of the Grand Canal.

They definitely could have. While the Light had ordered the Fourth Crusade to force the heretics to repent, the Malatesti battle-wizards of the time – who had not yet been damned servants of the Dark – had not been shy in their participation, sacking and looting for days the wealth of Constantinople before returning to Venice.

But for some reason which had likely been lost to the ages, the Malatesti household had decided to install itself in the district of Cannaregio, directly west of the old Ghetto. And in winter, this district was the one to experience the full wrath of the north wind coming across the Venetian lagoon. The splendid parks and the avenues perfect to do some shopping were becoming places where it was best walk away from...as long as it wasn’t the Carnival, of course.

The good news was that House Malatesti, for all the fact this wasn’t their main residence anymore, had kept Ca’Bellicosa warm and in excellent condition. There was no sign of withering or fissures. Magic had been used profusely to keep the palace-fortress in good condition.

The bad news was that the decoration had absolutely not been changed in the last two centuries. The great tapestries, paintings, and other artworks proclaiming the triumphs of Malatesti warlords over their enemies were still there. And yes, many of them were about killing French wizards and witches...including plenty of members of the Trinity and the Army of the Light. Plenty of trophies kept behind enchanted glasses – wands, swords, armours – confirmed that the boisterous proclamations made by the tapestries were completely justified.

“Welcome,” the Champion of Ares threw neglectfully his coat towards a divan the very colour of blood, “to the palace that is about to become our headquarters for this exciting Civil War. Welcome to Ca’Bellicosa.”

“Really?” Yegor Poliakov answered, his voice slurring and hesitant. Suddenly, the half-Veela knew what the odour she hadn’t been able to recognise was.

Formidable. There were only three Champions among the Doge Court, and one of them had arrived drunk.

“Really,” the Dark Champion of War looked very satisfied about it, “granted, some of the furniture for every member of the Court will arrive in the next days, but I can assure you, it is the perfect stronghold for our needs. It can provide a lot of things few other buildings can deliver.”

“Such as?” Fleur asked, despite having the feeling she didn’t really want to know.

“Well to begin with...a dungeon and cells able to contain some of the most illustrious members of our opposition.”

Fleur groaned. The Dark Champion next to her violently coughed.

“We should...we should...” damn it, how many bottles had Poliakov emptied before coming here? “We could...err...torture them for-”

The fist of Romeo Malatesti struck without warning. Soon, both hands of the Champion of War were around the throat of the Russian Champion, and the mood was anything but playful.

“You disobeyed my instructions. I told you to stop drinking. You are going to obey, or I will get rid of you. The Doge Court needs only the Doge to survive, and so far, you’ve been absolutely useless. This is going to change. Otherwise, I will make sure the first death of the Fourth Task will be yours. Is is perfectly clear, Poliakov?”

“Yes! YES!” The drunk Champion shouted, his slurring absent and replaced by obvious terror.

“Good.” The hands of the Champion of Ares stropped strangling the throat of the Durmstrang student...and given the red marks, it had clearly been intended to be a very serious threat.

“Good,” Romeo Malatesti took a more martial stance while admiring an enormous two-handed sword encased in a glass container. It was quite telling the blood on it had not been removed before the enchantments placed it beyond the reach of the ravages of time. “Now we are going to need to recruit heavily. And by we, I mean of course ‘I’. I have need of plenty of Guards who won’t hesitate fighting with rapier and wand against the killers of the two other Court. I have need of warriors, and I need them yesterday.”

“All the warriors I am friends with won’t follow you...Doge.” Fleur answered curtly.

This was the absolute truth, by the way. With most of her network consisting of Army of the Light members, it was not a stretch to affirm most would prefer dying than kneel before Romeo Malatesti.

“Many won’t...won’t go against the Dark Queen.” Poliakov echoed her sentence.

“Then find the ones who will!” The eyes of the Champion of Ares burned with all intensity. “I don’t care how bloody and spectacular this is to be, this is the Carnival Civil War, and as the Powers are my witness, we are going to make it a***war***!”

Fleur shivered, and the winter weather of Venice was not the cause of it.

“If we do this,” the blonde-haired Champion did her best to not make it sound like a protest, “the Night Court is going to run circles around us. The Day Court may be filled with clumsy amateurs, but the Night has all the intelligent monsters.”

A bit late, the French witch realised the last part of the comments were seriously undiplomatic...but Malatesti seemed more amused than annoyed.

“You’re right!” The Stymphalian Bird Animagus advanced again towards them, but this time he stopped well before touching any of them. “But it doesn’t matter how fast they run if we have a motivated, determined, tyrannical army in pursuit!”

Poliakov coughed again...with real fear in his eyes.

“*We* are the Doge Court,” and it was the royal ‘we’, none of the two Champions who heard it had any doubt about that, “and we are going to *win*.”

**15 January 1995, Ca’Sforza Palace, Venice**

All in all, the selection process for the Artificers had taken over three hours.

It was the time it had taken them to review all the applications one by one, and yes, they had done it, even with an informal accord between the six Champions of the Night Court. The last thing they needed was to discard a brilliant strategy proposed by one of their potential recruits, and to realise during the Fourth Task it may very well have worked if they were a bit more patient and dedicated to read all the documentation.

Obviously, there had been a fair amount of bargains and informal accords agreed to, especially when it came to sharing lore and spending hours assisting Artificers for their grand projects.

But after three hours, it was over.

At least Alexandra hoped so...night had fallen upon Venice, and they had many subjects left to discuss...to say nothing of the dinner.

“We agree, then?”

“I have no issue for the final list.” Ambre de Courtois replied in the name of all the Champions present.

“Good. Then the Artificers will be: Roksana Vulchanova and Susan Bones for the Necromancy adepts; Katharina Feuerbach and Alessia Doria as Alchemists practitioners; Irina Sydorenko and François de Montbel for the Rune experts; Astrid Sverre and Teleklos Arali will be our Elementalists; and as Generalists, we will have Fred and George Weasley.”

Was it a coincidence the last Champion of the Dark was among this list? Absolutely not. But his skills made him far too valuable not to recruit...and Lucrezia Sforza had vouched for him, guaranteeing he was not the hot-headed troublemaker Malatesti was.

“A strong sum of talents,” Viktor Krum approved. “What is the next subject we must speak of?”

“Actually,” their Succubus host said, “I thought we could discuss the next topic while we have dinner. The chef of Ca’Sforza has prepared for us a delicious fish soup that is absolutely to die for, it would be a crime to not taste it.”

Even if Alexandra had not been a Hydra Animagus, her stomach would have pushed her to agree.

“I support this motion.”

And with a unanimous vote soon following, they left temporarily the hall they had used for their deliberations...and entered after a short walk another one, though this one had a decoration entirely focused on the gastronomy of Venice.

The paintings which showed food were absolutely beautiful. The red-coloured soup they were served was temptation itself in smell, and the taste for her tongue and mouth was even better.

All the members of the Night Court visibly supported this, because there wasn’t a word exchanged until the last ladle of soup was devoured.

Only then Eleonora da Riva spoke with a content expression.

“That’s a meal I wouldn’t mind repeating for many more dinners.” The Potter Heiress was one of many Champions who shook their heads in approval. “I think we discuss the next problem we haven’t yet solved, no?”

“Yes...” Lucrezia Sforza changed her posture from ‘adorable host’ to ‘dangerous predator’. “In that case, the subject is how we’re going to protect our dear Night Queen from being discovered the very first day of the Task.”

Alexandra scowled. Heavily.

“I know I haven’t been the most subtle Champion during the three first Tasks, Lust, but this was by choice. Discretion wasn’t going to allow me to win a lot of points...and in many cases, I would have lost badly if I gave my opponents, you included, more time to put together a coherent plan.”

“Oh, I didn’t want to insult your cunning,” the Succubus immediately apologised, “I just know that the Army of Light has artefact to boost the tracking abilities of the Light Champions they have under their dominion. You may try your best, my Queen, but with a Champion of Horus and the boy empowered by Fate on your heels...well, they won’t take long to find you.”

“Not to mention Falk must have a few stalking capabilities,” Lyudmila added with a displeased expression. “The Trickster knows he possesses few other noteworthy skills. Though one must say, if the leader of our Court is in danger, we are all in danger.”

“All? No.” The Heiress of House Sforza clasped her hand above her plate. “My House and their allies have become very familiar with the work of the Archmage and his senior lieutenants. Like every theory, their most powerful artefacts have flaws...in this case, they can’t possibly locate people who are not sworn to any Power or will potentially be sworn to a Power.”

“That would remove Krum and I, plus the majority of the Artificers and all the Warlocks and the Guards,” Ambre de Courtois enumerated. “Unfortunately, that doesn’t help much for the Champions.”

The Ravenclaw Champion had to agree with the French witch; four out of six was largely sufficient to condemn them to a quick defeat.

Then Lucrezia Sforza whispered something in Italian, and suddenly it was as if her skin and her whole body was covered in...something that looked between a latex layer and a shroud of darkness. The red robe was gone, the Succubus was-

And as fast as it had begun, it ended.

Where Lucrezia Sforza had been playing the role of hostess in a tight red robe with a nearly indecent amount of cleavage, well...this was still Lucrezia Sforza in her seat.

But her face, her skin, and most of her body were now invisible, for the Champion of Venus had replaced her robe with a pearly white costume of the Venetian Carnival. It was as if, in less time to say it, a Winter Queen had been conjured...something that should be impossible.

Yes, you could conjure clothes magically...you could transfigure those you were too.

But all materials which made a T-shirt or a Wizarding robe had limits, be it in how long they could stay transfigured or how well they would hold under the strain.

“It has to be a convincing illusion,” Ambre de Courtois murmured while rising from her chair to prove it. But when she touched the long white gloves and the heavy winter costume, her stupefaction only increased. “How?”

The same phenomenon which had shrouded Lucrezia Sforza happened anew, and less than five seconds later, the Succubus was back with her red robe and usual looks as if nothing had happened.

“As Champion de Courtois was able to verify, this is no illusion.” There was no gloating, but the smile of the Venetian Champion told them how much she relished the rest of the Night Court’s astonishment. “This is one of the new creations House Sforza has financed for decades and only recently been successful at. We call it the ***Changelina***.”

“Oh.” Many eyes turned towards Eleonora da Riva. “Oh, Powers...you have created something that allows you to store an enormous wardrobe of clothes inside a magical-powered object...and to wear the stored dresses and associated items when and where you want.”

Lucrezia grinned.

“You’ve always been the smartest of the Light Champions, Eleonora. Yes, that’s exactly that.”

Alexandra cleared her throat.

“I suppose that this...this Changelina is also imbued with anti-tracking Charms or something playing an equivalent role for whatever inventions the Light uses?”

Otherwise it wouldn’t solve the main problem, just delay the inevitable.

“It does,” the Champion of Desire and Lust rose, before turning and presenting to them the back of her head. There was a flicker of magical darkness, and then suddenly revealed there was a sort of black rose flower literally stuck to the Succubus’ skin. There was no collar or any necklace; the flower-shaped object seemed to have its own life and stick to the Champion on its own.

“If you were allowed to examine it with Magnifying Charms,” their host continued after the Changelina disappeared anew and she took back her place at the table, along all who had left it to have a better view, “you would be able to see the thousands of Runes which were carved on the surface and the multi-layered Enchantments which were cast to give it permanent properties.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” Krum laughed before clapping his hands. “Extraordinary! No need to brag, it is a superlative magical innovation! Where do I sign to have one...assuming I don’t need to sacrifice my soul or something?”

Lucrezia seemed for a short moment taken aback, as if she had expected a lot more resistance. But her smile came back extremely fast.

“No, no need to sell your soul. The Changelina is a magical focus...it requires only a bit of your magic and a few drops of your blood to fully activate it.”

“So it falls under the Dark category,” the Tsar’s daughter shrugged it off like it was unworthy to even be trampled by her boots. “Big deal. When are we going to have them?”

Lucrezia grimaced.

“That’s...where the problem begins. A Changelina is extremely expensive to create, and we don’t have many people to fabricate them right at this moment. And for those Enchanters and Masters assigned to the project...a Changelina is the work of over one year, from start to finish.”

“How expensive are we talking about?” Eleonora asked with a curious expression. “Because while I know you don’t use the work lightly, every Champion around this table can’t exactly be described as poor-“

“The individual cost, assuming we’re willing to go for a zero profit margin, is of five million Galleons. And naturally, House Sforza needs to compensate for the techniques, the lore, the ateliers, and the Masters we paid for several decades to make it possible.”

Alexandra grimaced internally as she imagined the monumental sum of efforts, money, and talent that had gone into creating the Changelina.

“Just to be sure...above or below twenty million Galleons for the individual black rose?”

“Above,” the words ‘black rose’ seemed to amuse the Succubus, for some reason, “definitely above, *my Queen*.”

“Err...” Viktor manifested his shock aloud, and plenty of them chuckled. “In...simple terms, what does it mean?”

“It means,” Ambre de Courtois declared soberly, “that not counting the Changelina Champion Sforza is using, I’m betting there is only an additional one available. And she wants to give it to the member we can’t afford to lose. Am I wrong?”

“One minute,” Alexandra protested, trying not to think about the idea of wearing such a fantastic artefact on her. After all, the Exchequer had likely thought Lucrezia would win the Third Task, and the second Changelina must be the contingency in case they were wrong. “This is an unprecedented and marvellous heirloom to stay anonymous during the Carnival, but no Champion will need it at every hour of the day and night. If we rotate the existing two between-“

“I apologise, Alexandra,” the Succubus politely interrupted her, “but it won’t work. A Changelina, once it is properly activated and symbiotically united with its owner...it can be removed, but it is a long and consuming process. And after that, no one else but the original owner can use it without long and difficult rituals. For two different Champions to use the same one would require weeks at best between each use.”

“Ah.”

“No possibility to increase the numbers of Changelinas available?” Eleonora wasn’t discouraged, and she received an ironic expression from her fellow Venetian Champion. “I am not obtuse, Lucrezia. I know it is ruinously expensive...but twenty million or all the millions in existence are sometimes better than losing one’s life. The Army of Light and all their killer-friends are going to come for us with blood in their eyes.”

“I wasn’t kidding when I said it took over one year to create one...and I was given the impression the creation process increased after the first prototypes.” The blonde Succubus sighed. “I wasn’t given the exact number of Changelinas currently completed, but I am certain it is less than ten. And one of them is owned by my mother...who won’t under any circumstance sell it. Nor will I sell mine. I apologise, but I won’t relinquish it.”

“For once, I can’t really blame you for it,” the Dark Queen groaned. “Can we find another, less depressing subject and come back to it later?”

“Of course!” Lucrezia Sforza all too readily agreed. “Salad or cheese now that we’ve enjoyed the soup?”

**15 January 1995, Ca’Luce Palace, Venice**

When it had been announced by Longbottom, Cedric had not argued against making the palace of Ca’Luce the principal meeting grounds for the Day Court.

It was in the middle of Venice and therefore extremely convenient to use it as a base before and after everyone explored the city.

It was a place no one would come to spy upon them, since the palace had its own independent security team, stern men in white uniforms and golden decorations.

But after four hours inside it, the Champion of House Hufflepuff wasn’t feeling as appreciative of the feat this palace had been placed at their disposal.

Maybe it was his growing pessimism after fruitless debates and a lot of bickering.

Maybe it was his imagination running wild.

But the golden furniture seemed...oppressing.

Everything was golden and bright. Everything was illuminated and radiating light. From the outside, Ca’Luce had to be a flamboyant torch in the middle of the night – though it wasn’t that late, winter meant the sun had long gone to sleep.

The palace was perfect, but it was not spreading the familial warmth of the Hufflepuff Common Room or many other locations he felt pleased to visit every time.

It was the kind of cold perfection that was great, sure, but you wanted some distance away for yourself.

Something supported that when they had left the hall for an interlude – and to avoid gambling on whom from Falk and Montague was going to draw his wand first – had been confirmed. The halls, the toilets, and some trophy rooms were opened to them. The rest? There were golden doors in their way...and they were sealed.

Quite evidently, Ca’Luce was a palace where they could meet each other...and do nothing else.

Cedric had certainly been given no sign their ‘benefactor’ was going to open them other sections including bedrooms and other critical places in the near future.

Nor were the trophy rooms particularly reassuring.

Cedric looked at the glass in front of him, and reading with difficulty the Italian description, was informed it was the helm which had belonged to...a Champion of Hades?

“What happened to it for this helm to be melted like that?” He murmured for himself. “It looks like someone poured gold lava or something incredibly hot upon-“

Loud footsteps echoed behind him – there were none of the fabulous Scuola Regina carpets here, and so walking alone was not something that couldn’t be noticed unless you were deaf – and Cedric turned his head to see it was Neville Longbottom who had entered the trophy hall...followed by Leo Black, Ron Weasley, and Angelina Johnson.

“The interlude is already over?” It shouldn’t be, they had agreed on fifteen minutes to...cool the tempers.

“No, I...” the Day King coughed, and his unease could have been written upon his face.

Cedric knew it was not Hufflepuff behaviour, but he felt a bit vindicated watching the problems catching up with Longbottom. The first ‘royal act’ of the Gryffindor had been to place his substitutes among his Court, and this wasn’t something that had poisoned the intra-Court diplomacy very deeply.

“I wanted to know how I could regain your support,” the younger Champion said after visibly hesitating for several seconds. “You have...been...err...”

“Silent for the last thirty minutes? Yes.”

When the other Champions of the Day Court with the possible exception of de Condé were busy hurling accusations at each other, the safest thing to do was to not open your mouth.

It wasn’t like it caused personal drawbacks; after four hours, they had yet to select one Warlock besides Angelina Johnson.

“Okay. And...I suppose you want several Hufflepuffs among the Day Court, right?”

“I think,” Cedric chose his words carefully while the beautiful smile of Cho went to the forefront of his thoughts, “that given how this disastrous meeting is playing out, it would be way better if none of my friends and fellow Hufflepuffs played a part in this masquerade.”

“You can’t do that!” Of course the Weasley ‘Guard’ had to open his big mouth. “Hogwarts Champions have to support each other!”

Cedric chuckled...before realising the fourth-year Gryffindor was serious. Oh, damn it.

“Strange,” the Hufflepuff Champion commented idly. “I don’t see Montague being invited to this little gathering.”

The redhead had the good grace to blush...but not to apologise.

And to say Cedric had not even mentioned Potter.

“Montague’s support would...err...not give us skilled Slytherins to recruit.”

“That’s a certainty,” Cedric replied amused, “according to the Hufflepuffs who stayed at Hogwarts, they’re all busy trying to place themselves in the good graces of a certain Ravenclaw Champion.”

The fourth-years, including their proud Champion, gaped.

Angelina Johnson, however, was not surprised at all.

“It makes sense,” the dark-skinned girl approved. “The Junior Death Eaters they sent are functionally useless. Zabini is not, but everyone knows he is Potter’s not-so-secret spy to keep an eye upon them.”

“But the rules and the sizes of each Court favour the Day!”

“Maybe they are,” the Gryffindor Quidditch Chaser shrugged, “but most of the Slytherins will take their own lives before recognising you as their King.”

Cedric nodded in agreement. By this point...well, he wasn’t going to say that Slytherins and Gryffindors couldn’t cooperate, younger years were rumoured to be friendlier with each other these days, but with Black, Weasley, and Longbottom in the Day Court? The reflex to join their opponents had to be huge...

“Anyway,” Cedric tried not to sigh...he really tried, Helga’s kindness help him. “Your strategy of proposing me some seats for potential courtiers of House Hufflepuff will quickly end in disaster if I accept. You think we were bickering before? Falk, Montague, and Ruspoli are going to jump to the ceiling and erupt in rage the moment your move is known.”

The Hufflepuff Champion had to pause to prepare what he felt were the most appropriate words.

“I think you have good intentions, Longbottom. But you have to realise, the way you’re doing it...it annoys profusely the other Champions.”

Naturally, one of the troublemakers had to open his big damn mouth. This time, it was Black’s turn.

“Neville Longbottom is the King of the Day Court! He can do what he wants!”

This time, there was no power in this world that was strong enough to not make him facepalm.

“Black. The titles are just for the Fourth Task. There’s no Magical Oath to enforce it. Yes, the Champions are supposed to obey the King or the Queen of their Court when there are Judges around, but there are only ten of them, and they won’t be around when the strategy councils will be organised. The authority of each ‘King’, in case you failed to remember the last four hours, extends as far as the other Champions are willing to grant him. And in Champion Longbottom’s case, that’s not very far.”

“Then it’s because Champions like you aren’t supporting us enough! It clearly works for Potter and her band of Black Witches!”

Would it be a record to facepalm twice in the same minute?

“Black...” Yes, he groaned. Who was going to blame him? “First of all, we have no idea what is happening during the meetings of the Night Court. So what ‘works’ and ‘doesn’t work’ is clearly more rumours than fact. Then you forget that Potter has an advantage that Champion Longbottom here lacks.”

“And this advantage is?” Neville asked politely, but way too late...and the way he didn’t stop Black was not a point in his favour.

“Potter can beat one-on-one all the Champions of her Court, with the exception of the Dark Queen, and even that monster she is able to fight to a draw when it comes to it. She has the power to back up her decisions...and the Tasks have proven she won’t hesitate to kill one Champion if he or she fails to heed her orders.”

And this was something that should have been obvious to everyone in this room...apparently it was the case for Angelina Johnson, but not for the others...and the others in this case included the one Champion who mattered.

“I...I really need a majority of Champions to support me, don’t I?”

At last, wisdom was heard by the Gryffindor’s ears.

“Yes. Preferably four out of seven, so we can make sure that while the three biggest troublemakers protest, we can force them to compromise...otherwise they will be denied their lieutenants among the Day Court.”

“That’s not going to be easy.”

No, no it was not. Henri de Condé would be ideal for the third Champion, but who would pay the fourth, Cedric had no idea. Lucas Gauthier, for all his lack of notable results in the First, Second, and Third Tasks, had began to assert himself as his own man at the table. Between the French wizard, Falk, Ruspoli, and Montague, this was a circle of antagonism that wasn’t going to be easy to tame.

“No,” Cedric confirmed, “but it is necessary. Otherwise it’s going to be every Champion for himself...and the only reason we may survive a few days during the Fourth Task will be because there’s a lot of members of the Day Court, and it will take time for the two other factions to eliminate us completely.”

“The Light has...methods to track Dark Champions. We will be able to dictate how we battle them.”

“Yes,” he commented sarcastically, “as long as we stop arguing with each other before they’re several kilometres away...”

**15 January 1995, Ca’Sforza Palace, Venice**

The dinner had been sumptuous and delicious, not that anyone had much doubt about the quality after the fish soup and the fantastic cheese. Still, the Italian dessert – for the life of her Alexandra couldn’t repeat the name without mangling it – had managed to surprised them, being part-cake, part-cream.

The Hydra Animagus she was going to have to do a lot of sport every day, if dinners were like this one became the norm.

Now they had returned to the hall where they had debated and bargained with each other. The table was abandoned for now, though. Lucrezia Sforza and Lyudmila Romanov were both drinking their coffee, and amusingly enough the two Dark Champions had chosen rival brands to drink.

All the other Champions had settled for alternative beverages. Alexandra had chosen hot chocolate, and as expected from a master-class chef, the quality was first-class.

And so the important subjects could be spoken of again.

“The Carnival costumes’ importance can’t be understated.” Their host insisted when they reacted first with polite smiles.

“No one is saying the contrary.” Alexandra remarked. “But I think everyone in this room understands you mean something more than this simple series of words.”

“Yes.” The Succubus didn’t waste the effort to deny. “From the beginning to the end of this Tournament, and yes, I include the days of the Great Balls in it, we Champions will have to present a completely different behaviour to the world. We will have to be...comedians, on a stage the size of a city.”

“There are limits to what you can do.” Krum warned. “I, for example, am the only male Champion of the Night Court. I’m sure there can be distractions and feints when we aren’t going for the Aquamarine Keys...but once we do, the choices will be narrowing. I’m willing to tolerate a lot of things, Sforza, but I will warn you right now: I won’t disguise myself as a girl.”

“Of course not!” The Venetian Heiress’ tone would have been more reassuring if she wasn’t baring her teeth. “But there are ways to disguise oneself without hiding in a woman’s costume. For example, by choosing the role of a famous Comedia dell’arte personage. I was thinking about *il Capitan Spavento* for you, Champion Krum...though some of you may know it better as *Matamore*.”

Alexandra had heard the name from Blaise Zabini months ago.

“Isn’t it the role of the braggart who pretends having defended the walls of Constantinople alone against a million Turks, or something like that?”

“Ah yes,” Ambre reacted, “the soldier proclaiming everywhere he goes he has accomplished many exploits while deep inside he is ready to bolter for the exit at the first serious challenge. Yes, that’s a good idea.”

“It’s quite unlike our dear Champion Krum,” the Dark Queen approved. “Most of the time at Durmstrang one could wait one week to hear his voice if the teachers didn’t force him to speak. With this role, the sheer audacity of his swaggering may impress the Day idiots so quickly they will not suspect him.”

“Hiding in plain view has its advantages,” Viktor Krum was forced to grunt...loudly.

Alexandra chuckled, and she wasn’t the only one.

“It’s that or we make you a gallant Marquis, Krum,” Ambre de Courtois threatened jokingly.

“Hard choice,” the Bulgarian Seeker rolled his eyes, deciding – wisely – not to go after the storm. “But I presume, Champion Sforza, this little attempt to give me a costume and a role was leading somewhere?”

“It did, indeed.” The Succubus drank what was left of her coffee and adopted a more serious stance. “I want you to name me as this Court’s Mistress of Costumes.”

Alexandra had no need to ask what would be the prerogatives they gave to the Champion of Lust; the name itself was quite self-explanatory. The Ravenclaw witch opened her mouth to answer-

“Absolutely not!” Eleonora da Riva answered vehemently. “That’s MY role!”

“Eleonora...” Even Lucrezia seemed taken aback temporarily by the intensity of the defiance from the Champion of Innocence. “You know my family owns the best authentic shops when it comes to masks and costumes.”

“No, that’s my family!” The Light Champion retorted. “No matter how much you pay the fashion magazines, we retain the superior creators and fashion experts!”

“The last Queen of the Carnival wore one of our creations!”

“After six years of victory from my House!”

“Wow,” the Dark Queen whispered as two Champions began to shout at each other and the four others watched in awe the timid-looking da Riva shout at Sforza, “Carnivals are really serious affairs, in this city.”

“Well,” Alexandra winced, “at some point in the eighteenth century the event was lasting half a year. That kind of leaves its mark. Don’t you have any Carnivals at Saint Petersburg?”

“We have,” the Tsar’s daughter acknowledged. “But it’s a single day, and half of the nobles use it as excuse to get drunk. Five hours before midnight, you won’t find anyone sober. I’m pretty sure nine out of ten deaths which happen that day are people who have fallen drunk into our canals.”

“That’s...I don’t know if I have to found it stupid or awful.”

“Both,” Lyudmila said darkly. “Believe me it’s both.”

As the bickering was getting out of control, the Potter Heiress did what promised to be a chore by itself.

“Champions!”

The first time, of course, she was ignored.

“Champions! If you want me to name Krum as Lord of Costumes, please don’t be quiet!”

“Yes, *your Majesty*.”

“Yes, *my Queen*.”

Life was really far simpler when the nickname of ‘Exiled Queen’ was limited to her friends...

“From what I heard, you both have access to costume-makers and costume-making shops in great numbers, correct?”

“Correct,” Lucrezia Sforza answered for the two Champions. “And yes, I can confirm the competition is particularly...ferocious.”

An interesting idea instantly blossomed in her head...and Alexandra smiled.

Why not? As long as it encouraged the best of them and not the worse...

“Good to know. Then using my authority as Queen of the Night Court, I order the two of you to work together and prepare the Court for what is to come. There won’t be a single Mistress of Costumes; there will be two.”

Lucrezia Sforza howled in laughter.

“They are going to murder each other while the night is still young!”

The Champions of Innocence and Desire glared ferociously at the Dark Queen, their previous squabble already forgotten in face of the new ‘threat’.

“We are going to prove you wrong.” The Succubus purred dangerously. “My Queen, permission for a certain Russian Heiress to be our first victim...I mean costume tester?”

The Champion of the Morrigan nodded gravely.

“This is a sacrifice I consent with good grace.”

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

Morag couldn’t do anything but giggle, watching the sleepy expression of Alexandra arriving for her breakfast.

“Difficult night?” She sang.

“Our debates lasted so long that ‘night’ wasn’t really appropriate,” the green-eyed Champion of Ravenclaw grouchily replied. “We ended it when it was morning...about one hour ago.”

“Ouch,” the MacDougal Heiress winced in sympathy. “It was that difficult to agree to a common plan of action?”

“No, not really,” Alexandra shook her head before filling her plate with an impressive quantity of food plus two glasses of orange juice. “Well, there was some tension between a few Champions on some topics, but the problem was, the more subjects we debated upon, the more we added topics to speak of. And that meant that in the end, some subjects will likely be decided this week...like the selection of Warlocks and Guards.”

“Oh,” Morag was half-disappointed, half-relieved. A good part of her had been somewhat worried she wouldn’t be chosen...while apparently, the Champions had not spent their time discussing of that issue at all. “What did you spend all these hours upon, if it’s not a great secret?”

“The details are secret,” her friend smirked with a tired expression, “but basically, a lot of the debates were about what we were going to do to prepare for the Fourth Task, and what our...associates waiting behind the scenes would authorise in terms of interpretation of the rules.”

“I understand,” the redhead Ravenclaw said in a low tone. “The Artificers?”

“They are chosen. And we have a coherent strategy.”

Given the reasonably satisfied smile, Morag was going to safely bet that Susan Bones and the Weasley Twins had been chosen from the list of volunteers.

“And do you-“

Morag didn’t finish asking her question, for at this moment, Romeo Malatesti entered the Breakfast Hall, and moved towards a table where a significant number of Venetian and Durmstrang students were seated. The Irish Heiress frowned as several were handed letters.

And the further she examined those wizards who were contacted by the Champion of War...they were all tall, muscled, and looked like they were ready to breathe violence on command.

“The Guards of the Doge Court, you think?”

“Almost certainly,” Alexandra nodded after swallowing the part of bun in her mouth. “He doesn’t go for subtle, our dear Malatesti...”

“I’m not sure this Romeo has ever read the definition of subtlety in a dictionary,” Morag giggled, “they are certainly big and tall...and skilled with a blade. Not subtle-“

“Morag, I was referring to the fact that while keeping the entirety of our new Court members a secret is an exercise in futility, it’s far more intelligent to force your opponents to spy upon your moves so that you are certain you have a good idea of what each Court can bring to bear against you. Even Longbottom didn’t announce high and loud he recruited Johnson, Black, and Weasley yesterday...and Gryffindors are hardly noted for their cunning plans.”

“Good point,” the blue-eyed Ravenclaw grimaced. “Wait a minute. When you distributed the roles between each Champion, was one of you assigned the role of...err...spymaster?”

“If I answered truthfully that question,” Alexandra gave her a smug look, “I would have to Obliviate you.”

That was a yes, then.

Who could be in charge of that? Not Alexandra, she had too much on her plate, and though her friend could make a valiant effort, it wasn’t where her strengths lay. Lucrezia Sforza? The Succubus excelled at this game...but she was definitely too obvious. Bah, Alexandra would tell her when she became part of the Court...if she was selected, nothing was guaranteed.

“Is there something important that requires my services for this afternoon after our classes?”

“Yes, you’re going with me to Venice.” Alexandra must be quite hungry, because half of her plate’s content had already been devoured. “The intricacies of the rules and the roles of each Champion weren’t the only things we discussed last night. I also revealed the enigma supposed to lead me to the Tournament Clue.”

“You took a risk...” Morag hesitated before continuing. “Though I suppose it was a show of trust which was accepted?”

“It was,” the Champion of Ravenclaw clicked her tongue with a semi-satisfied smile, “and though a lot of what they proposed was highly speculative, it is highly likely an excellent point was made before we were all too exhausted to think coherently.”

“By your Succubus host?”

“Logical reaction, but no,” Alexandra drank her orange juice like there was no tomorrow. “It was Champion Krum who had this excellent idea.”

“And this interesting idea is?”

The green eyes of the Hydra Animagus flashed with intense determination.

“We spent hours searching for the ‘true lion’ in the streets of Venice.”

“Yes...”

“But we forget that in many ways, the quest to find this Tournament Clue is the closest thing there is to a treasure hunt.”

“Err...yes.” The MacDougal Heiress didn’t really see where it was going...

“Why would the Judges base their Tournament Clue on an already existing lion which would have spent centuries enduring the rain and the other elements assaulting Venice, when they have largely the budget to create one?”

“Ah,” Morag gaped for a few seconds...a few seconds which were sufficient for Alexandra to imitate the pose of someone taking a photo of her. “Not funny, Alex.”

“I completely disagree.” Her friend stuck of out her tongue in a childish way.

“However...I agree it makes sense, but the fact is...we still don’t know which type of lion we’re still searching for.”

“Absolutely, but if we are to have a chance to discover what sort of lion it is, it must have been built within the boundaries of the Fourth Task’s battleground.”

“Venice.”

“The Venetian Lagoon.” Alexandra corrected smugly. “We’re going to visit quite a few sites which have made the fame of the Venetian Republic for centuries this afternoon.”

**16 January 1995, Murano, Italy**

“Yes, yes we were the ones who created the lion you are looking for!” the Glass Enchanter who had presented himself as Nerio beamed. “A superb piece. It’s always a bit saddening to create something we won’t see again after completion...but creating a new glass artwork we’d never done before was exciting!”

“I suppose,” Alexandra smiled, as the good humour of the wizard was infectious, “that the Judges told you where they were going to hide it?”

“I’m afraid not,” the Venetian man chuckled. “I was given free will whether to help the treasure-hunters or not if you should happen to visit my humble shop...but for the hunt itself, I won’t be of great value, I’m afraid.”

“All right,” the Potter Heiress wasn’t too disappointed, to be honest. There was no way the sadistic wizards – and witches – who had written the enigma would have made the ‘quest’ so easy to solve. “Let’s speak of the lion itself. I suppose given your specialty there’s no point of asking if it’s made or glass or not, but could you give us a few details, please?”

“Certainly,” Nerio replied amicably. “We tried to create it as realistic as possible with our new formula of Enchanted Glass. As a result, this piece of art is more resistant than a statue of bronze or iron would be. And of course, far more beautiful.”

“I apologise,” Morag cleared her throat, “but please, when you say as realistic as possible...”

“The creation my peers and I worked upon is the size of a real lion.”

And here Alexandra had been looking for some leonine emblem of relative small size...

The good thing was that should her eyes fall upon it, there would be no problem mistaking it for something else.

The bad thing was that despite visiting Venice for several days, there had been no sign or rumour indicating someone had seen a glass lion the size of a real one.

“According to the instructions we were given, the eyes of the lion were made of a specific red glass, and so was the orb representing the world between its paws. We think of replicating it for additional creations, I will freely admit. It is enchanted glass, but presented under the correct light, it shines like dozens of rubies.”

Well, that explained...everything.

‘When the claws turn crimson’ was referring to the orb between the paws, and the light of the ‘not-rubies glass’ illuminating the lion’s paws.

And since it was a ‘planetary orb’, Alexandra was ready to bet that a name or a representation of the island they were supposed to look for had been carved upon this glass creation.

The only thing left was to discover how to be ‘guided’ to the Lion itself.

Though before brainstorming about that, Alexandra had a few question for the Glass Enchanter.

“This is not my treasure-hunt, Sir, but for the sake of my curiosity...was your team also the one which forged a golden book of glass?”

“No, I’m afraid not.” Nerio was prompt to dismiss that idea. “We knew of it, as three different stoves were chosen for this prestigious command, but we did not work upon it. Your Judges mentioned only a book, we weren’t aware it was supposed to be golden. The third model was supposed to be a small model of ship...thankfully not real-sized.”

“Yes,” Alexandra had to find her self-control, “that is quite fortunate...” a ship made of glass in the lagoon wouldn’t have been discreet at all.

“Why did you say you wouldn’t see it again after completion?” Morag asked.

“The lion is supposed to be the prize of the one who discovers it,” the Venetian glass-creator said as if it was evidence. “The Judges didn’t inform you?”

“It may have skipped their mind...” Alexandra answered, “or more likely, I suppose there’s a letter informing us next to the lion that it is indeed a prize we can keep as symbol of our perseverance.”

“It would indeed make sense,” Nerio confirmed, visibly relaxing at the idea his creation would not be abandoned the moment the treasure-hunt was over.

There were a few more exchanges, and then the two Ravenclaws took their leave of the shop owner, returning to the cold and empty streets of Murano.

It was frigid, as the northern wind blew directly in their face, making their heavily-charmed winter clothes a priceless luxury...but what a view.

Murano was not just an island where glass-makers imagined and created a stupendous number of glass artworks per year.

It was also a pearl in the middle of the Venetian lagoon, with only the nearby island of Burano – famous for its embroideries and coloured houses – half-way visible in the distance.

“So!” Morag said cheerfully. “We know what to look for, but we don’t know where it is. The lion’s creator was nice, but where it came to the guiding, he wasn’t of much help.”

“I don’t think he was supposed to be the guide,” Alexandra said slowly as she transformed her human eyes into a Hydra’s.

“And...why?”

“Look at the structure in the distance...according to the touristic guide we bought, it is called the Faro. And it is...”

“It’s a lighthouse,” Morag huffed. “Okay, I fully approve what you said all last week: the Judges are sadistic bastards.”

“In a way,” the leader of the Night Court said whimsically, “we should have seen it coming. Venice is more than the city; it is a Lagoon...and the Republic was mercantile and depended at all times upon the waves. For men and women who have always based their wealth and their prosperity on their capacity to master the seas...the lighthouse is the greatest symbol of guidance that can possibly be.”

“The worst part is when you say it like that,” Morag groaned loudly, “it sounds so simple...do you think the lion is waiting for us here?”

“No, not the lion, but certainly coordinates or a few clues...most likely to another island.” Alexandra hissed in displeasure as another gust of frosty wind reminded them that yes, winter was here. “Let’s go. Hopefully, we will have finished our lion-hunting before sunset.”

“Now who is too optimistic, your Majesty?”

Alexandra raised her eyes to watch the cloudy sky and groaned.

**Author’s note**: And so ends the ninety-ninth chapter. Truly a huge number...I would be lying to say I imagined years ago I would soon reach the one hundredth mark.

Next chapter there will be the recruitment of each Court will be complete, and the preparations for the Carnival will end.

It’s time for the Civil War of the three Courts to begin...