**Chapter 102**

**The Fires of Judgement**

**15 February 1995, Campo San Giobbe, Cannaregio District, Venice**

When the fireworks and the other lights of the Carnival’s festivities illuminated it, Venice was a very beautiful city.

But when the lights died out or were switched out, the old houses, the walls, and the canals suddenly became oppressing. Shrouded in the darkness, everything became mysterious, unfamiliar, and potentially dangerous.

At least that was the opinion of the lone being waiting in Campo San Giobbe, doing his best to make himself as discreet as possible.

It was still several hours before dawn, and though the shadowy soul had taken the risk to come in person, even a blind man couldn’t doubt that the enchanted lantern moved to the agreed location was a signal that could bring a lot of bloodthirsty hunters here. And if they did...the individual hidden behind a black cloak shivered.

There were rumours about the tortures certain sides currently living in this very city enjoyed to practise upon living beings. In the opinion of the visitor of San Giobbe, it was better not to verify if the rumours were true the hard way.

Minutes passed. Not far on the shadowy being’s right, an owl flew away, certainly to hunt mice and more, after having finished its letter-delivering duties.

At last, as the impatience of the magical-wielder was getting increasingly thin, footsteps were heard, and another individual in black cloak approached the lantern.

A medallion was presented, and the first of the participants to arrive at San Giobbe relaxed somewhat. A sign of displeasure was made, however, when the mask of his counterpart was removed.

“I was expecting...someone else. *Someone more important*,” the last two words were accented to make a strong insinuation...one which made the other magical-wielder chuckle.

“You have not done anything to deserve someone of greater importance.” The sentence was both slap in the face and humiliation branded upon his heart.

A new chuckle, one...which sounded...weird...was heard.

“And besides, there are other plans. Some require a direct touch, you know. Thus I was sent.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds. Hidden behind his black cloak, the magical-wielder gritted his teeth, before deciding to voice what he had come for.

“I can give you what you want.”

“You can give us part of what we want,” the other black-cloaked figure corrected with an amused tone, “I doubt sincerely you can do everything by yourself. Dumb luck gave what a hundred like you couldn’t have achieved with talent and raw power...but the target we speak about is way too strong to have a single point of failure.”

“Without my part,” annoyance was impossible to control, “there can’t be any success. Daring raid or all-out attack, you would all perish.”

“Which is why I was sent,” the tranquil answer reassured, though it didn’t force every fear to disappear instantly, “to negotiate the price of your betrayal.”

“Is it a betrayal if the other party betrayed you first?”

Slowly, part of the black cloak was lifted for a few seconds, revealing what had been hidden so far.

“I see. Yes...betrayal seems...adequate. Your price?”

“Protection and salvation,” the first being voiced, trying as best as he could to hide the fledgling hope he felt.

“It is going to cost you. The one you expected to come instead of I? No big believer in charity, I can assure you.”

“The information is extremely valuable.”

“It is. But there are opportunities to be seized, as you hinted yourself. And for them to be executed, information isn’t sufficient. Certain events need to happen. They need to happen at the right time and the right place.”

The first magical-wielder felt his hands shake and a lot of strength leave his legs.

“You want me to contact...*them*?”

“*We* want you to contact *her*. And we want you to be inside the castle, so to speak, when the battle will begin.”

“If...if I do that...if I...” the words failed before they could be uttered, “if the worse happens, will my family be protected?”

“They will.”

It was extremely dangerous. It was likely an excellent way to get killed. And yet...the pain, the humiliation, the betrayal suffered...too much had been endured. Too many oaths sworn had already been broken. Too many risks had already been taken. And death might come anyway, the monsters who fought openly in this city had made that clear.

“Give me your terms.”

**15 February 1995, San Sebastiano Church, Dorsoduro District, Venice**

The first thing Alexandra did, as she entered the church and the gates closed behind her, was to go kiss Susan, something that prompted Eleonora da Riva to throw a Ducat to Ambre de Courtois.

“Fortunately, Lucrezia isn’t in charge of the Night Court,” Eleonora da Riva remarked, “else this meeting would have rapidly unravelled into an orgy.”

“Now you’re exaggerating,” Alexandra replied, before giving a second kiss to her girlfriend and turning around.

“No, I am not, and you know it...my Queen. You haven’t seen what she can do when sufficiently motivated to worship-”

Ambre de Courtois cleared her throat and the Champion of Innocence didn’t finish what she had been about to say. Too bad, it sounded very ‘interesting’.

“We don’t have much time,” the French girl said seriously. “By what are we beginning this morning meeting?”

“The main challenge of the day, I suppose,” the Champion of the Morrigan raised an ironic eyebrow, “the sea jousting.”

Ambre snorted.

“The sea race, you mean.”

Alexandra blinked.

“I was under the impression there was going to be some jousting, hence the name.”

“There will be jousting,” the older female Champion assured her, “but it is not under the form of a tournament bracket, when the winner of a joust competes against the other winner of another joust, or the one who wins the greatest number of jousts in a day is declared winner. It is a race; the Judges have been very clear about that during the morning announcement on the Plaza di San Marco.”

“Hmm...” Alexandra thought about it for a few seconds, and concluded it made a very disturbing amount of sense. The Judges and the Exchequer wanted a lively spectacle, and a race was sure to satisfy the crowd. “I suppose it is out of the question to use non-magical devices to boost the speed of the boats?”

“Indeed,” Ambre de Courtois nodded. “One of the few rules is that the boats used, which are some modified and wide gondolas by the way...you have to use rowers, six in all.”

“Rowing?” Alexandra grimaced. “Do we have six people who have the skills to row together and not look utterly ridiculous?”

“We don’t,” Eleonora da Riva admitted. “Which is why we must use six skeletons.”

Coming from a Champion of Light, the sentence didn’t lack in irony. Regrettably, Alexandra chose to let it pass, there were too many things to speak of to waste time.

“That’s a major number of skeletons to sacrifice if things turn bad.”

“Better to sacrifice skeletons than to sacrifice the members of the Night Court.”

“True.” The Ravenclaw Champions passed a hand in her back hair. “Can Lyudmila Romanov control that many skeletons?”

“No,” Susan intervened. “That’s why I and Vulchanova will control the rowers. The Dark Queen is proficient in Necromancy, but she can’t do everything at once.”

 “Especially when avoiding the ‘jousting’ from the other boats. Because I suppose it’s what this competition is really about, isn’t it?”

“It is. The ‘Captain’ of the boat is standing upon the elevated platform at the rear of the gondola, armed only with a ‘sea spear’, and must do his or her best to throw into the water the other ‘Captains’ with it.”

“Surely they must be more,” Alexandra said when the rest of the explanations didn’t come. “Intervention of non-participating Champions? Number of Artificer’s creations to be used?”

Unfortunately, the emotionless expression Ambre de Courtois gave her wasn’t good news at all.

“Six rowers, one Captain, that’s everyone who can sit in a boat,” the Beauxbatons Champion told her. “And the Captain must be a Champion of one of the three Courts. There will be a maximum of twelve boats authorised for the race; if the three Courts don’t field that number, the rest of the ‘race gondolas’ will be crewed by students of the Scuola Regina.”

“And if a Captain ‘abandons’ his or her boat during the race, he or she is forced to return to the beginning of the race and start again.” Eleonora added.

If it hadn’t been for the fact they were all very serious, Alexandra would have wondered if the Champion of Innocence hadn’t been coached by Fred and George.

“Why are we bothering?” Alexandra asked slowly. “I have a modicum of experience with dangerous situations. Most of them pale compared to what awaits here. I assume the race is using the Grand Canal?”

“The entire Grand Canal,” Ambre confirmed. “The crews are beginning near the train station at the entrance of Venice, and then must row across the entire Grand Canal, only turning right after the ‘corner’ of the Church Santa Maria della Salute. From there, the crews will have to move west in the Giudecca Canal, until turning left for the Lavraneri Canal. It’s only at that point the race is turning eastwards again, along the entire southern shore of Giudecca Island. When you are able to enter the Canal of San Giorgio, west of the isle of the same name, you can rush towards the Plaza di San Marco where the Aquamarine Key awaits.”

“This is going to be a slaughter.” Alexandra declared frostily. “The Grand Canal is nothing but a butchery waiting to happen if our enemies have prepared adequately. Fireworks can saturate the entire width of it, and with the Statute of Secrecy, we can’t afford to erect powerful shields to protect our boat.”

“No, but the other Courts have fewer Artificers to rely upon.”

“Relying on the incompetence of the Day is not something that strikes me as a good strategy. Why don’t we try to steal the Aquamarine Key in the mean time, and let Doge and Day kill each other?”

“First, because there are Ducat penalties.” Alexandra grimaced again when Ambre de Courtois spoke. “Remember, my Queen, that each Champion can withdraw twenty Ducats per day at various locations? Not participating in this race will forfeit said Ducats for at least three days...and add a penalty of a hundred Ducats to that punishment.”

Of course, how could she have forgotten the Judges were complete sadists?

Alexandra breathed out.

“This is your plan today, Ambre. Are you confident the plans you now have to modify in a hurry can work in practise?”

“I...I believe so, my Queen. The first part on the Grand Canal is going to be extremely dangerous, yes, but there are a lot of artificers’ creations we can use against the other eleven boats. And once exiting the Grand Canal, Lyudmila Romanov’s chances of victory are excellent.”

“The surprises we discussed yesterday?”

“Yes.”

Alexandra looked at Susan...who gave her a smile and nodded.

“All right,” the Night Queen said with more assurance than she really felt, “tell me how you intend to win that canal race.”

**15 February 1995, Ca’Bellicosa Palace, Cannaregio District, Venice**

“Why does our Court have to participate in this stupid race?” The more Fleur heard about this stupid ‘sea jousting’ – or whatever idiotic name Malatesti wanted to use for it, the less she wanted to be part of it.

Yegor Poliakov, for once, loudly voiced his support in her favour.

“I agree with her! Why do we participate in the first place? We don’t have the exact coordinates, but we know the Aquamarine Key will be presented to the victor of the race near the finish line, right on the doorstep of the Ducal Palace. Let’s just wait there, and catch whoever wins. The participants will be exhausted, and maybe heavily wounded.”

“You forget that I found this nice Diamond Key and I don’t want to-

“If you say ‘Ducat penalty’, I will murder you before dusk,” Yegor Poliakov threatened the Dark Champion of War before filling his cup with a strange moonlight-coloured beverage. “I don’t care about Ducats or whatever damned thing you’re striving for. We agreed the Aquamarine Keys were the bait; give us a plan that proves it.”

“My dear,” Romeo Malatesti grinned with the smile the two other Champions had known to dread. “The point of an ambush is to catch your opinions flat-footed. The Night Court and the Day Court must not even *think* we are ready to spring our fantastic trap upon them.”

Yegor’s face was a model to describe the word ‘unconvinced’. The Dark Champion emptied several drinks in silence while glaring at the unrepentant ‘Doge’.

“And what,” the Durmstrang Champion spoke loudly and clearly, in a voice that betrayed no sign of drunkenness at all, “exact conditions are required for them to ‘not even think’ at all about our ambush?”

“I’m so glad you asked this question,” the leader of the blue-themed Throne bared his teeth, “in my opinion, the best way to let the two other Courts lower their guard is to requisition three rowing gondolas for ourselves.”

Fleur’s brain for a second didn’t compute. What was he saying? The boats couldn’t be requisitioned without a Tournament Champion being a Captain, and the Doge Court had only three Champions, and-

“NO!” Yegor exclaimed first.

“Absolutely not.” Fleur emptied her glass before glaring at Malatesti.

“May I remind you that-“

“Yes, yes, you’re the Doge...may I remind you that between here and the place chosen to begin the race, I can cut your throat, and throw your corpse into the canal?”

“What she said,” Yegor slammed his fist against the table. “Damn it, Malatesti! Do you want to kill us all?”

“You’re way too dramatic!”

“He is not,” Fleur felt her heart beat faster, as she reminded herself the map indicating the places the ‘sea jousting race’ would go through. “The Grand Canal, given the absence of rules, is nothing but a gullet where we will be enduring the attacks of the other Courts. It is highly likely one of us is going to die before we leave the heart of Venice behind us.”

“Slaughter doesn’t begin to even cover it,” Yegor Poliakov supported her arguments. “And the moment we get out of the Grand Canal, I am ready to bet my vaults Potter will wait for us and ready one of her army-killer spells just in case. I don’t want to be roasted by lightning, thank you very much.”

“Death’s Champion won’t use lightning,” the Dark Doge replied with assurance. “The sky is moderately blue today, and the clouds rather thin. There’s not enough Peruvian powder in the world to hide one of her lightning spells-“

“Then she will use fire, water, or something else,” Poliakov interrupted rudely and impatiently. “Yes, she won’t use the lightning to avoid breaking the Statute. Great. I’m sure our souls on our way to the afterlife will be very reassured by that once we drown to the bottom of the Venetian canals.”

“Yes.” Fleur finished sipping more of the excellent juice in her glass. “Water is not my element.”

Strange, she didn’t remember the drink she had asked for being that filled with sugar and alcohol.

“You will. And you will love it.”

Yegor Poliakov laughed hysterically, though the hilarity did not reach his eyes.

“No, no I don’t think...yes, that could be...no, I mean, yes...” the expression of the Durmstrang Champion transformed into a horrified one. “What did you put in my drink, bastard?”

“Something to make you more interested in living this Task to the fullest,” Romeo Malatesti delivered a malicious grin, “don’t worry, it is just going to last for twenty-four hours.”

Fleur felt her heart beat faster, and suddenly thoughts that should have never been in her head were there, temptation itself tainting her mind.

“You corrupted me!” She hissed, trying to draw her wand...and not finding it in her holster.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Romeo Malatesti yawned, and for all she tried, Fleur was overwhelmed by emotions, and many of them had nothing to do with anger or loathing. “You only drank a dose of the Bacchus Philtre. It is going to remove your inhibitions for about...twelve hours.”

“I will...destroy you...for that...” after more than a month where they had been no poisoning attempt, nothing to manipulate her mind and soul, the Champion of Life had lowered her guard unconsciously. And the Dark Doge had exploited it right now.

“All that came before you have failed,” the damned soul sworn to War replied arrogantly, “are you ready to don your new costume?”

The doors opened, and several costume-makers became visible, carrying...a costume that was quite unlike all the disguises she had worn so far. The dominant theme was fire, of course, as the flamboyant red was everywhere, but the mask was avian, and-

“This is a costume supposed to represent a Phoenix.” She managed to blurt out, as everything became too vivid and intense...Fleur knew just by looking at how thin and revealing the material, that she wouldn’t have accepted to wear this costume before today.

But with the Bacchus Philtre destroying who she was with every heartbeat? Fleur felt something dangerous awaken in her, and she knew...she had to resist, but her thoughts and her body were turning against her.

“Yes, but one of a particular kind,” Romeo Malatesti replied enigmatically.

“What are you saying?” Yegor Poliakov had a slurry and incoherent voice again. “Phoenixes are Phoenixes. Immortal birds and all of that...”

“Are they? Phoenixes were not always like they are now. Light is not Fire...”

**15 February 1995, Ca’Luce Palace, San Polo District, Venice**

Cedric had a headache.

No, he had a ‘normal’ headache one hour ago. Now it was a colossal headache, and with the shouts made by multiple parties which were not going to be named for the sake of the Day Court’s unity, his poor ears were traumatised too.

Really, Cedric was glad Cho was not involved in this...absolutely chaotic mess.

“You aren’t going to intervene?” Montague asked by his side.

For all his attempts to hide it, the Hufflepuff Champion was sure some of his emotions were shown on his face when he looked at his Slytherin counterpart.

Graham Montague was...looking awful. There was no positive way to describe it. Longbottom had missed the eye and the mouth, so there wasn’t any problem when it came to vision or speaking, but...well.

For all the effort of the Healers, there was no point denying the evidence: three claw marks had disfigured Montague. Cedric didn’t know what sort of animal Longbottom had as an Animagus, but clearly, it was one which stopped the average healing spells from restoring a wizard’s flesh to what it had once been.

“Will you?” Cedric returned the question to the sender.

The other Hogwarts Champion coughed.

“No, I thank you, Hufflepuff Champion. I opened my mouth to tell him where his stupid ideas led us, and look what he did to me.” The Slytherin paused. “Are you going to tell me I got what I deserved?”

“No,” Cedric replied neutrally, “I don’t like you, Montague, and I likely never will. But you didn’t deserve what Longbottom did. You were not diplomatic at all, but the critics were true and necessary to say.”

Cedric made a small grimace, though he tried to keep it as discreet as possible, because here in this golden palace of arrogance, you never knew who listened to your words.

“That’s one of the reasons I’m only speaking when commanded to, this morning, if I have to be honest.”

Montague gave him a sardonic expression...well, as much of a sardonic expression as a wizard could give you with half of his face.

“The Boy-Who-Lives is drunk from the wine of his own legend, but surely he isn’t going to strike you. You’re not me...you’re not a Dark Wizard, Diggory.”

“I wish,” the Champion of Hufflepuff said darkly, “I could agree with your words with a significant amount of confidence.”

Because really, why would Longbottom spare him?

Inter-House politics? The ‘Day King’ had proven he didn’t care about that at all, since there were going to be very unhappy Slytherins at Hogwarts and elsewhere. Yes, Montague was often thought as incompetent and not someone to befriend, but there was that, and then there was a Gryffindor attacking the Slytherin because the latter disagreed with the former. If the Champion of the Lions was ready to kill a Slytherin, one couldn’t say he wasn’t ready to tolerate the consequences crippling a Hufflepuff would entail.

Cho Chang? His girlfriend would certainly try to avenge him with her Alchemy, and given the level of competence shown by Longbottom in certain fields of higher magic, she had a good chance to achieve it. But the Boy-Who-Lived seems these days to disregard everyone who couldn’t wield certain ‘Light’ spells.

Albus Dumbledore? Cedric wanted to say yes, but it would have been before this Tournament. Now that Neville Longbottom had completely changed, so much that he was more or less the Hogwarts version of Frode Falk, it was clear the Boy-Who-Lived had only one master, and it was not the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

“Yeah,” apparently in the seconds of silence, Montague had arrived to the same conclusion he did, “maybe you’re right.”

“I wish I wasn’t,” the Champion of House Hufflepuff admitted, “but given how they are glaring when I make an objection, I am unwilling to test out if *they* would attack me too. I am not a coward, but they are dismissing logical and reasonable arguments the moment I push them forwards.”

“Ruspoli and Gauthier continue to argue with them.”

“For now,” call it a gut feeling, a dark premonition, or something else, but Cedric simply didn’t believe the opposition of the two was going to last for days.

“This doesn’t seem to anger you.”

“Anger?” the reply was barely above the level to consider it a murmur, “why would I be angry? If the first day has proven something, it is that we are a band of uncoordinated fools rushing into the first trap the Night Court will bait us with.”

For the Day Court to have a chance to win, they would have needed to have someone like Alexandra Potter enforcing order. Or the psychopath witch of Durmstrang. Or...maybe not all the Champions of the Doge and Night Courts, though Malatesti seemed to have forged something incredibly powerful despite often being mistaken for a dumb mountain of muscles.

“No, I am not angry, Montague.” The Day Court was going to lose the Fourth Task, the likelihood was incredibly high barring a series of unconventional victories that no Champion seemed tailored for. “I am just...disappointed. There’s fifty-eight minutes left before the ‘sea jousting’ or whatever they want to call it will begin, and we still don’t have the names of the Champions who will be participate in this jousting competition...and when it comes to it, how many boats we will use in the first place.”

“I will bet two Ducats there won’t be thirty minutes left when the crews will be decided.”

“Please,” Cedric scoffed. “I don’t gamble on lost causes.”

**15 February 1995, Somewhere near the Scalzi Bridge, Santa Croce District, Venice**

“Cousin?”

“Yes?”

“You realise someone is going to die for that, right?”

Alexandra took her time to consider the idea, before shrugging.

“I am not the one who made the Arlequina costume, cousin. Nor I am the one who ‘convinced’ your dear Champion to wear it.” All the merit for that went to Lucrezia Sforza and Eleonora da Riva.

“Well, I’m just warning you...*whoever* did it,” and the way the sentence was said confirmed Astrid Sverre knew very well who was responsible, “better watch her back. There is going to be some payback in the future.”

“Hmm...I will worry about it once the Fourth Task will be over.”

“You think she’s going to wait until the end of the Task before getting her revenge.”

“She hasn’t exactly the choice.” By mutual agreement, the Champions of the Night Court had all agreed to temporarily put existing feuds and enmities on hold – not that there were many of them, but still – until the end of the Task and not before that. Only a betrayal of one of the six Champions could lead to Lyudmila Romanov’s getting an opening, and Alexandra was sure the Succubus and the Champion of Innocence were far too smart to give it to her. “Now changing the topic...there’s far more people than I predicted.”

“I agree,” Morag said, the sole ‘Guard’ of the Night Court to be a student from Hogwarts, “every canal and street near the Grand Canal is so crowded it’s going to be difficult to navigate and arrive in time where we need to be.”

“In that case,” Alexandra smirked, “you better go where you need to be.”

“You’re going to stay here?” her friend asked, evidently surprised. “You have a costume the Light certainly won’t think of you, but-“

“The costume is deliberately chosen to be the complete opposite of a certain character.”

And the Potter Heiress had to admit, Eleonora had done a superb job with it.

When Alexandra had looked in the mirror this morning, a true Winter Queen had been there to examine.

The mask was a pearly white, with only the holes for the eyes, the nose, and the dark painted mouth providing any contrast. Most of the disguise, from head to toe, was a snowy white, with golden snowflakes, and the scarf around her neck was consisting of enchanted white feathers imitating the snow. Above her head, there was a crown of frost, the spikes of blue-white materials imitating successfully spikes of ice.

“Now, go. The race is going to begin in ten minutes.”

“Are you sure they are going to come? Neither the Day Court nor the Doge have shown their masks so far.”

“Don’t worry, they will come.”

Malatesti, for one, was not going to resist the idea. The possibility of beating the Night Court in front of the tens of thousands of spectators who had woken up this morning to watch the Carnival Civil War? Oh no, the Champion of Ares wasn’t going to miss that.

One minute passed as the ambiance became more and more excited, and Lyudmila Romanov took position on the platform of her modified gondola. Obviously, her costume was way too tight to mistake her as someone masculine, but the way the ‘Arlequina character’ was played, combined with the myriad of colours woven in her disguise and the buffoon-type hat, was largely sufficient for the Ravenclaw Champion to be sure that if they didn’t remove her mask, the other Courts would not think the fearsome Dark Queen was the ‘Captain’ of the boat.

And then the Champion of Death felt it.

Right as the first outrageously costumed members of the Day Court were running in direction of the gondolas – Longbottom and his accomplices were as late for the Task as they were for their classes, it seemed – the Basilisk-Slayer felt it.

Darkness was unleashed.

And three seconds later, red fireworks exploded.

They were not filled with Peruvian instant darkness powder. But the principle was the same. A red fog shrouded the immediate vicinity of the gondolas waited to be placed in the Grand Canal.

For all the evidence it was a vulgar imitation of the Night Court’s favourite tactic...Alexandra was reluctantly impressed. It had been less than twenty-four hours since the Task officially started. But clearly Malatesti had recruited several competent Artificers to invent something that could stand up to Fred and George’s creation.

It was going to be...interesting, though the Night Court, of course, had not rested on its laurels in the mean time.

The first Champion of the Doge Court to reveal himself was Poliakov, flanked by six blue Legionnaire-Guards, who were clearly going to be his rowers.

Really, who else from the Doge Court was going to wear a half-black half-red costume of Harlequin, all the while a huge barrel of wine was pushed by two assistants?

Trumpets played a thunderous musical note.

“HIS EXCELLENCY THE BARON HARLEQUIN, THE UNDEFEATED DRUNK GONDOLIER!”

Poliakov saluted...and missed only by a few steps taking the plunge in the Grand Canal.

The crowd, believing it was part of the spectacle, obviously loved it.

More fireworks exploded, but this time it didn’t spread a red fog. No, this time, the fireworks were more akin to a fire of red and gold.

Alexandra, by a monumental effort of self-control, didn’t sigh. Why, oh why, was everyone of note, trying to dress or do something spectacular in Gryffindor-coloured robes?

And then she came out of the illusionary fire.

The Champion of the Morrigan knew instantly who it was. The hair may have been dyed red, but there was no doubt whatsoever in Alexandra’s opinion that it was clearly Fleur Delacour.

But the way the half-Veela moved, it was completely unlike the Light Champion.

And the costume...Lyudmila’s costume was tight, but not *that* revealing.

By the dark soul of Sauron, Alexandra didn’t know if *Lucrezia Sforza* was wearing a costume that revealing! The amount of cleavage shown bordered on the ‘completely indecent’, and what was covered by the fabric of red...it showed a lot, that was all she was going to say.

“HER EXCELLENCY THE PHOENIX KNIGHT, BORN TO RULE THE FIRES OF VENICE!”

Malatesti wanted to be murdered by Ra. That was the only explanation Alexandra could find for the moment.

“AND NOW, HE IS GREAT AND LEGENDARY! BORN TO RESTORE THE GLORY AND SPLENDOUR OF VENICE! THE MASTER OF CANALS! TEH KIND OF THE JOUSTS! HE IS....THE DOGE!”

Like the two other Champions, Malatesti’s choice of costume for today was utterly outrageous. Blue, blue, and blue, but in different shades, some shining like magical sapphires, while other came in softer but solidly enchanted pieces of cloth. The Champion of War looked like a Merchant Prince about to war...if the Merchant Prince had zero sense about what was needed for a maritime expedition.

It was worrying. And it was not because the costume was ridiculous. The Champions of the Night had agreed this morning the Doge would likely send two Champions to participate in this race. No one had thought there would be three...this changed...everything.

“It seems,” Alexandra remarked with more calm than she felt as Ambre de Courtois went to stand by her side, “we aren’t the only ones capable of surprising the-“

This was the moment the red-dyed Fleur Delacour turned and took the initiative to kiss languorously Romeo Malatesti.

As their masks were not covering their mouths, it was not impossible...but it was Fleur Delacour they were speaking about. The Champion of Life was not exactly known for her tolerance of the Dark Champions...unless by ‘tolerance’ you meant ‘trying to assassinate them’.

And it was not a chaste kiss. It was a long, deep kiss, with tongue and everything.

The Venetian spectators, both magical and not, loved it.

The Day Court’s Champions, who had rushed until they were mere feet away from it, looked absolutely flabbergasted, for all that they had masks half-hiding their facial expressions.

Alexandra found it hard not to cackle as Nigel and Luna took photos for the posterity of it.

“Okay...that was...something.” Alexandra shook her head. “Where is Lucrezia?”

“You think she played a role in this?”

“You are an intelligent witch,” the green-eyed Hydra Animagus snorted. “What do you think?”

**15 February 1995, Grand Canal, Venice**

The shock of watching Fleur Delacour devouring the lips of the Doge, at least, had a positive virtue.

It was so outrageous it had temporarily destroyed the hold Ra’s Light had over his mind.

Henri was thankful for that, if nothing else.

Unfortunately, that was the only good news he could somehow look forwards to.

For some reason that the Champion of Horus had difficulty to discern, he, Henri de Condé, had been chosen to be one of the Captains, for this ‘Great Sea Jousting Race’ or whatever it was called.

Meaning he was standing on a ridiculous gondola, wielding a no less ridiculous ‘sea lance’ shining like it had been Charmed with ten Lumos spells, with four Guards and two Warlocks in front of him. In case, you were wondering, there were the rowers.

How in the name of the Sacred Falcons were they going to be coordinated when wielding magic openly on the canal was impossible – they were thousands of non-magical spectators with a direct view everywhere he glanced, light of Thebes!

The Day Court had not trained for this. There was no plan, and the less said about any contingencies, the better. They had nearly not arrived in time.

At least Longbottom had not been so stupid to send ALL the Champions on the boats. Okay, it would have been very difficult, since not every member of the Day Court was at Ca’Luce when the deliberations were made. Seven boats would have meant forty-two rowers, plus seven ‘Captains’. Theoretically, they had the forty-nine members required.

Practically, with many wizards and witches spread across the city or outright refusing to participate, the ‘seven boats’ gathering’ was never a realistic option.

The Day Court would ‘only’ be represented by three gondolas with jousting platforms.

One was ‘captained’ by Frode Falk, evidently. The Champion of Frigg’s hatred was so obvious Henri was sure all the other Champions had recognised the signs of it. The humiliation delivered by the Dark Knight yesterday had clearly done what it was supposed to do.

But Falk was not the sole Champion to be present aboard this gondola. Urmah Temen was there too.

In Henri’s opinion, it was completely stupid. The Champions of the Light, among the Day Court, were the most powerful magical practitioners. Sending them on the water, where they would not be able to use their offensive spells without tearing apart the Statute, was stupid.

But then there was the second boat, whose Champion was Graham Montague. Thus is Henri had the thought of protesting being given the third boat, he would have quickly closed his mouth after the ‘incident’ of yesterday.

The Champion of Horus had the feeling asking too many questions now was going to get you brainwashed or killed.

Sometimes in the last years, the Beauxbatons Champion had wondered why the Exchequer had not neutralised Ra and several of his main lieutenants.

The answer was not difficult to find out given the information he had now: the Legion of Darkness had killed all the moderates and those who could restrain the ‘excesses’ of the Archmage and his advisors, leaving the fanatics and the bigots in charge.

Speaking of which...

“The elimination of the Doge Court takes utmost priority,” Frode Falk spoke imperiously, and Henri had to bite his tongue before he asked him who had made him King. “Keep Malatesti busy, I will help you the moment I’ve drowned Poliakov.”

“Understood.” Whether he was lost in a sea of Light magic or not, he had to ask the next question. “Delacour?”

“We will let our moronic Dark Wizard endure her wrath the time we need to kill her two handlers. Once they’re dead, the Imperium they’ve cast on her will vanish and we will have a powerful ally on our side.”

That...that was a very arrogant and dangerous strategy. Henri was hardly a specialist of the Imperius, of course, but Fleur Delacour didn’t seem to be manifesting the effects of a witch on the receiving end of it.

And if she wasn’t under the Imperius, there was a good chance that dead or not, Fleur Delacour would not be on their side for the entirety of the race.

“We have been given a priceless opportunity to remove the entire Doge Court from play and to cripple the Night Court!” the Durmstrang Champion truly breathed arrogance this morning. “While our King hunts for the rest of the black souls, let us score a decisive victory. IN THE NAME OF THE LIGHT!”

Many spectators applauded after hearing the battle-cry.

The support turned into explosive laughter when Falk was hit by a red-blue-green ‘sea joust’ in the stomach and catapulted in the waters of the Grand Canal for the second time of the Task.

“My deep apologies,” the buffoon-disguised Champion who had just committed the deed profusely ‘apologised’, “I wasn’t looking where I was sailing, as true as my name is Arlequina!”

**15 February 1995, Grand Canal, Venice**

“ON MY MARK, GREAT CAPTAINS OF THE SEA JOUSTING RACE! 3..2...1...GO!”

From the very beginning, it was a circus.

Lyudmila wasn’t surprised at all.

The Champion of Loki had to be one of the only Champions to think of training her rowers before the race began, and it had been a totally humiliating disaster. Thus the Night Court had decided to use the skeletons for this chore. Necromantic constructs didn’t tire, could be perfectly synchronized, and weren’t going to insult each other each time someone did a wrong move.

Apparently, some boats were only acknowledging the problem now.

“TO THE RIGHT!”

“TO THE LEFT!”

“ROW FASTER!”

Disguised as Arlequina or not, the Dark Queen could not stop herself from chuckling.

This was...hilarious. The race wasn’t a minute-old, and already the incompetent Champion of Hogwarts had already nearly sunk his own boat, along with two belonging to the Scuola Regina’s students.

“They should-“ her comments abruptly ended, as a rain of fireworks suddenly set aflame the Grand Canal.

“I could appreciate from a little help here,” the Fenrir Animagus spoke in the ruby-shaped magical communicator that allowed her to talk to Death and all the other Night Court members spread over the Venice. “I can’t deal with the fireworks without breaking the Statute, and my boat is not heavily enchanted enough to resist the flames.”

The rain of fire which fell on the first boats racing east of the Scalzi Bridge already claimed its first victim. One of the boats crewed by students of the Scuola Regina was struck by a big explosion, and broke in half, the golden capes and green uniforms of the rowers finding themselves enjoying the freezing water of Venice for the first time of the day.

“We’re on it,” she heard the voice of Feuerbach, “Alchemical counterattack coming in five seconds.”

Her German lieutenant was as good as her word.

In less time than it took to say it, the fireworks’ rain ceased, and suddenly there were...were those bright red boxing gloves? Yes, they had to be that and-

“For our school!”

No rest for a poor Dark Champion, then.

Lyudmila parried the blow destined for her head with a yawn, her ridiculous multi-coloured lance finding its use for the first time of the day.

Another boat of the Scuola Regina had caught up with her embarkation, and by the look of it, they were far faster for now than her skeletons.

“We will defeat you, Arlequina!”

“Not if you don’t stay in the Grand Canal,” the Champion of Chaos smirked, and then used her ‘weapon’ – using this felt like she was spitting on her nice collection of magical weapons, seriously – like a pole so that the other gondola was pushed into one of the smaller canals away from the one they were currently using for their race.

Given how crowded these little avenues of water were, a massive collision was totally predictable, and the brown-themed costumed boat disappeared creating more chaos in its wake, though the shouts of consternation were loud, even with the crowd applauding or cheering.

Lyudmila snorted, before assessing the global situation...and though she was the first of the ‘Champion boats’, it was not all good news.

“Death,” the Russian witch spoke to the British Champion, “the rowers of the Scuola Regina are faster than ours.”

Lyudmila had eliminated two, and one was nowhere to be seen, but the other two boats, one blue-red themed, and the other looking like they worshipped a feathered serpent or something similar, were racing ahead of her gondola.

“Don’t bother with them for now,” Alexandra Potter answered after a few seconds of silence. “You’re going to be just in front of Ca’Luce in the next minute.”

The Champion of Loki grimaced.

“I hope you have a solution, because I don’t fancy-“

“TO YOUR LEFT! TURN TO YOUR LEFT IN THE CANNAREGIO CANALS!”

The Night Court threw fireworks which, under the cover of an illusion, erected a wall of ice.

It still felt as if a second sun was born over Venice.

**15 February 1995, Ca’Pesaro Museum, Santa Croce District, Venice**

Eleonora da Riva had known the Archmage of Venice would not agree to the limits every Champion had agreed upon. Not when the benefits included the death of several Champions of the Dark.

“Chaos?” The Champion of Innocence heard the Night Queen ask via her inter-Court communication ruby.

“I’m alive,” the Tsar’s daughter grunted. “The attackers?”

“They’re being dealt by...by anonymous benefactors,” Eleonora had already drawn her wand, but she was already too late. In the dark alley below the balcony, several figures in beige and violet costumes were busy throwing lethal spells at the Trinity mages that had been responsible for the onslaught of Light Magic. “I would advise you to stay in the labyrinth of canals for now, and avoid the Grand Canal for several minutes.”

“If we do that, we’re going to lose all our chances to win this race,” to say the Dark Queen’s voice was pleased would be the biggest lie of this Fourth Task.

“We still have the ice toboggans, Lyudmila,” Astrid Sverre intervened. “And...well, it can’t be helped. A second attack like this one may not kill you, but it certainly will destroy your boat and your skeletons.”

“I hate hiding. If you allow me to-“

“No,” Alexandra Potter said firmly and decisively. “We’re not going to begin an all-out war here and now, with thousands of spectators unavoidably being on the receiving end of the collateral damage.”

Eleonora breathed out, relieved her choice of the Court had not been in the wrong.

Below her, the last of the Trinity mages were down, and immediately body bags were summoned, with men disguised in costumes of Plague Doctors bringing forwards funeral gondolas and artefacts to remove all evidence of what had happened here.

“Ambre?” The green-eyed Queen addressed the Beauxbatons Champion next. “Our chances of victory?”

“Not optimal,” the French witch admitted. “But with the Day and Doge boats busy amusing the crowd with their ridiculous jousts, I think we can still finish in third place. Catching up with the two professional rowers of the Scuola Regina, however...it’s going to be complicated.”

“I see.” Eleonora didn’t hear a sigh, but she almost could hear it on the tongue of the one they called Night Queen for this Task. “Artificer Teleklos Arali?”

The Venetian girl tensed, knowing that calling expressly the Champion of Tiamat was never done for courtesy’s sake.

“I hear, Night Queen,” the oldest of the Dark Champions answered promptly in a very accented Italian.

“There are too many Champions of the Day and the Doge Courts jousting in the Grand Canal. It would be best to reduce their number before they leave it.”

“I understand.” Arali confirmed. “Attack will begin after all boats will have passed under the Rialto Bridge.”

**15 February 1995, Grand Canal, Venice**

The race had not begun ten minutes ago, and there were already many surprises, both good and bad.

In Morag’s opinion, one of the most surprising ones, and she didn’t know if it counted as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ really, was that Graham Montague was still in the race.

Whoever had gambled that the Slytherin Champion would still be on his gondola platform when the boats left the Rialto Bridge behind them was about to win *big*.

Of course, when you looked attentively, it was not as miraculous as it sounded.

Three ships crewed by students of the Scuola Regina had been sunk, the last one only seconds ago when Henri de Condé sunk it transforming his sea lance temporarily into a sort of divine luminous blade.

The two other non-Court boats had gained so much advance that they were nearly in a race of their own.

And of course, Henri de Condé and Frode Falk were trying very hard to kill Romeo Malatesti, while Fleur Delacour opened the way by incinerating every trap the belligerents on every side of the Grand Canal thrown in her direction.

Naturally, that meant Graham Montague had only to fight Yegor Poliakov, and the ‘Baron Harlequin’ was so drunk that the Morag MacDougal Heiress was extremely surprised he hadn’t taken a dive in the Venetian canal until now.

“You are ready?” Alexandra’s cousin asked with an expression that was more or less the perfect definition of ‘intense concentration’. “I will be too busy helping our boat in a few seconds. I won’t be able to help you.”

“Don’t worry,” Morag gave her an evil smile. “I am ready. And...oh, dear, Arali is making his opening move. The artificial reefs are surfacing.”

Truthfully, the things didn’t look like artificial reefs at all. The constructs looked far more like gigantic jaws of metal...and the noise they made as they opened and closed wasn’t of a nature to make Morag change her mind.

“Now!”

Morag poured her magic into the Runes that had been carved last on the stones near the Rialto Bridge. Instantly, an enormous chain emerged from the depths of the Grand Canal.

It was huge. It looked incredibly ugly, though Alexandra could be forgiven, as finding the bloody thing and preparing it for today’s race had been a challenge by itself.

The Champions of the Day and the Doge Courts suddenly realised the trap they had fallen into. The ‘maw-reefs’ in front of them, the chain behind – the skeletons were providing an illusion to make sure the crowd believe someone was moving the contraption of metal.

“ROW FASTER!” Falk screamed, and the comedy began anew, as each boat’s rowers agitated their arms in a hilariously uncoordinated fashion. “ROW FASTER!”

Cheers from the crowd doubled in intensity, before outright thundering when Poliakov’s boat was immobilised by the metallic jaws.

“THE BARON HARLEQUIN WILL NOT-“

But Montague arrived and treacherously struck him in the back with his spear, sending the Dark Champion into the watery embrace of the Grand Canal.

Then the acclamations became so powerful Morag’s ears were hurting.

It was difficult to think in this storm of noise and joyful exuberance.

“I activate the second trap!”

The red-haired Ravenclaw, truthfully, didn’t know if Astrid Sverre heard her, and she didn’t turn her head to check.

There was no time, because for all her hopes, thanks to subtle and not-so-subtle magics, all the other boats were in the process of avoiding the traps created by Arali, and the chain was too slow to overtake the gondolas by itself.

“I hope you love fishes, Champions.” Morag grimaced, as she poured her magic into the second set of traps. Fire was her magical affinity, and as such when you used something strongly associated with water, even if it was Runes...well, it was costly.

Alexandra could have clicked her fingers and done it, of course, but there was a reason why the Champions were considered Titans of magic in their own right.

Still, Morag was satisfied with what she had...especially as an awesome number of conjured fishes were conjured into existence, surging ahead to sink all the boats of the Doge and Day Courts.

Only for hundreds to be incinerated immediately by the crimson-clothed Champion leading the ‘gondola pack’.

“Morrigan be my witness! How is she able to do that?” Fleur Delacour was known to be very beautiful witch, a horribly prejudiced bitch when it came to Dark Magic, but there had been nothing to indicate she could destroy conjured fishes without any magical focus at all! At least Morag wasn’t seeing her using her wand, or any visible focus!

Thankfully, the Doge Court continued to launch many fireworks, so the public thought it was just a spectacular display of fire.

Something that cost the boat carrying Henri de Condé dearly, as the gondola used by the Champion of Horus was set ablaze. The rowers did their best to extinguish it, but the fireworks had clearly been enchanted, and without the appropriate spell, the inferno was rapidly uncontrollable.

One by one, the Guards and Warlocks of the Day Court abandoned their doomed ship, with Henri de Condé jumping last into the Grand Canal.

The fishes’ onslaught ceased, and Morag had to catch her breath. This Runic offence had...been quite exhausting. Trying it again would be very unwise, of that the red-haired Ravenclaw was sure.

“Alex,” she used her emerald communicator, “Poliakov and Henri de Condé are out of the race, but the others got through. Be careful, there’s something wrong about Fleur Delacour...she is far more powerful than she was in the First Task.”

“Thanks for the warning,” her friend answered, and knowing Alexandra like she did, Morag had the sentiment that the next battle-spell cast by the Ravenclaw Champion would not be a Tickling Charm. “Where is our dear Champion of Chaos?”

Morag opened her mouth...and just as she did, several small canals froze over, before shifting into a sort of toboggan...and from it the gondola carrying the skeleton rowers and the Tsar’s daughter were revealed.

The boat of the Night Court’s acceleration was mesmerising, and Morag watched delighted as Frode Falk gaped at the sight of ‘Arlequina’ returning into the Champions’ race.

The timing was no impeccable. It was too late to ram Fleur Delacour or whatever role the phoenix-costumed witch wanted to play.

But it was quick enough for the Dark Queen to be in reach of Graham Montague.

And as they were still several conjured everywhere, Lyudmila Romanov replaced her ‘sea lance’ with...a swordfish.

“NO!” The Slytherin Champion exclaimed. “NOT AGAIN!”

But a dolorous slap of swordfish later, the Day Court had one fewer boat in the race.

“Our dear Champion of Chaos is following the trend you created yesterday, don’t worry.”

“The humiliation of the Knights of Light?”

The spectators howled deliriously to manifest their amusement.

“No,” Morag chuckled, “I beg to inform you, oh my Queen, that the Second Battle of Slapping Fishes is being fought ferociously.”

**15 February 1995, San Giorgio Maggiore’s Island, Venice**

The two ships crewed by the non-Champion students of the Scuola Regina had gained a monumental advance when they entered the Giudecca Canal.

Which was not a surprise, really.

The Venetian crews, unlike all the Champions and the Court members rowing, had never trained for this competition, since they weren’t part of a rowing club, and hadn’t had a clue before yesterday that this skill may be necessary.

If this was a conventional race, the two boats who have disputed themselves the victory – the ‘jousters’ were not fighting right now, most likely saving their strength for the final line onwards to the Plaza di San Marco.

They were not cunning enough.

Fred and George had invented the Termite Arrows for exactly that sort of situation.

The newest creations of the two Gryffindors were looking very much like toy arrows for apprentice Robin Hoods...until they hit wood. If they did, they created an enormous hole that could create a lot of problems, especially when you were on a boat in the middle of a canal, that, in waterway terms, was very much an enormous highway.

Furthermore, Alexandra had decided not to save the ammunition. Each boat had been on the receiving of over twenty Termite Arrows, all of them sent to their targets by overpowered Bombardment Charms.

The Venetian students were too far away to be caught by the shockwaves, but it hadn’t been her goal anyway, just to shoot the arrows so fast that the unfortunate ‘race leaders’ couldn’t shoot down all the arrows before it was too late.

On that point, the offensive made possible by Fred and George was a great success. Five Termite Arrows were shot down, but forty seconds later, every crew member of the two gondolas was busy swimming, as their boats were now joyously sinking at the bottom of the Venetian lagoon.

“One problem solved,” the Champion of the Morrigan murmured, knowing that the other Champions who awaited the signal would hear her words. “Now to deal with the bigger problems...”

The Potter Heiress left several traditional bows behind her, for the attention of the public and the other Courts to watch. No, no one had used them, but for the sake of the Statute, certain appearances had to be kept.

Then Alexandra went to wait at another observation post of San Giorgio Maggiore’s Island. The remaining gondolas had yet to enter the Grand Canal, and as a ‘simple spectator’, she had to be above suspicion.

Seconds later, a familiar costume of Light Nun approached her.

“You didn’t do subtle,” the voice was no more discreet, and the ‘my Queen’ was not spoken at all, given how many potential hostile ears were surrounding them.

Alexandra snorted.

“You’re one to talk.” The Champion of Death replied sarcastically. “Phoenix Knight, seriously? And how the hell is she able to burn so brightly?”

“We gave her a little motivation...amazing what the Bacchus Philtre can do to a person of Veela lineage...”

“Please,” the green-eyed witch rolled her eyes while hiding her displeasure, “if you want to lie, at least have the good sense to make a somewhat believable explanation. Professor Slughorn told me about the Bacchus Philtre this year. It lowers somewhat your inhibitions for a time, but both Dark and Light magic in your bloodstream is capable of completely neutralising its effects. Also, I happen to have a good idea of a certain person’s thoughts when it comes to our Dark Doge. Unless you managed to force her to drink a *barrel* of Bacchus Philtre, she would have never kissed a Champion of the Dark. And that doesn’t explain her spectacular performance so far. Try again.”

While they had begun their exchange, the other gondolas had come into view.

There were only four left, and predictably, Lyudmila Romanov and the skeletons were in last place. At least something had gone right; the plan called for her to enter first or last the Giudecca Canal.

“It is...complicated.” Lucrezia Sforza began.

“Complicated,” Alexandra repeated ironically.

“Yours are not the only plans to change,” the Succubus said cryptically.

Alexandra was honest enough to admit that she didn’t like the sound of that.

“I seem to remember that in the past month, we had several conversations about *trust*. Do you think I am stupid? The repartition of the different Champions, Day, Night, and Doge, was known over one month and a half ago. The ‘guardian of the Ducal Palace’ did not come with such a scheme overnight.”

In fact, and both Dark Witches present knew it very well, Malatesti had not come up with this scheme on his own. And even if Alexandra was wrong, if Malatesti had really thought it would be a pleasant offering to the Exchequer...there was no way the Champion of Ares had the magical reagents and everything else needed to change Fleur Delacour’s behaviour so drastically in such a short amount of time.

“I...I am sorry, but there are plans that can’t be revealed at this time.”

This wasn’t the first time Alexandra had wondered if she wasn’t making an enormous mistake where the Fourth Task was at stake. Yes, letting the Light win would be a death sentence for her and everyone she cared about.

But was the victory of the Exchequer really something she wanted to watch in her own lifetime?

“I see.”

“The end result will be worth it, I assure-“

“Don’t promise anything, please.” How ironic that her costume was one of Winter Queen, and that she had a cold voice to avoid showing how little she liked this...this...was betrayal too strong a word or not? “Ambre. Abort the next phase.”

“We can still win this race,” the French Beauxbatons protested.

“Winning has just turned to be a secondary priority on my to-do-list,” Alexandra replied grimly. “I will steal the Aquamarine Key by myself. Get our Captain out of here. Now!”

“I will need ten seconds to-“

There was an enormous explosion in the distance.

And then, right in front of the boat where Frode Falk was urging his crew to row harder, the sea was engulfed in fire.

**15 February 1995, Canal della Giudecca, Venice**

Ron’s arms hurt.

His back hurt far more than his arms did, unfortunately.

Everything hurt.

Ron hadn’t liked the idea when they were told they were going to row, and he liked it even less now.

The moment they got out of this ship, the youngest Weasley boy swore, he would never row again.

This race was never-ending.

Frode Falk was insulting them, and he wasn’t doing anything to help them!

And every time he tried to convince his rowing partner that they needed to be in tune, like two chess partners, he was told to shut up and do like Falk said.

This was a bad day, one more after Neville began to behave like he was King of Britain and-

Ron Weasley sniffed carefully.

In the last ten minutes, the boat had been soaked with a powerful ‘perfume’ of fish, and not the one you wanted to find in your plate. Apparently, they had the Dark Knight to thank for that.

But now, they had left the Grand Canal, and it was smelling...not like fishes...no, he was recognising it, it was close to something...oil.

It was oil.

Ron sighed in relief. Yes, it made sense. A lot of oil could be made from fishes, right?

And Venice had a lot of fisheries, making a lot of oil with it. Right?

It was...then Ron watched the canal ahead of them. It was big. It was almost a big lake in its own right.

And there were absolutely no waves.

Not a single wave.

They were floating on a canal which had a layer of...oil.

“Guys...we have a problem.”

“Be quiet, Weasley, don’t you see Falk is preparing a decisive strike against-“

The canal was engulfed in fire.

Ron would remember later he screamed at that moment.

He wasn’t the only one.

It wasn’t a small fire, with a few big sparks.

No, it was an inferno, the kind of thing he couldn’t even cast with *Incendio Tria Maxima*.

“UR!”

Urmah Temen, Champion of Judgement, rose from his rowing seat, and held a clenched fist against the flames.

Ron shouted for him to stop, that he was going to burn....but the Light Champion did not.

Instead, before the young wizard’s eyes, the flames seemed to...disappear?

No, not disappear. The fist of Urmah Temen was absorbing the magical fire.

And as the Champion of Judgement did, his skin was changing from its usual shade of tanned brown to a charred black.

“Continue to row,” the older Champion ordered, “the blessings of Marduk are with me, and I will not perish for something as insignificant as those weak flames.”

Ron nodded, shaken, especially as he saw the words were no empty boast. The attack of the Dark Wizards was indeed losing in potency, and in many areas, the waves were returning as the oil had been entirely burned.

“Ha! An excellent performance Urmah!” Frode Falk immediately went on to cheer and pretend he had been part of the salvation effort. “With my help, this treacherous trap has not managed to scratch the paint of our boat. I am sure-“

And then the canal began to burn again. Not in front of them, no, it was right behind...and it was the red costume of a witch which was creating the inferno.

“Phoenix...” Ron gaped at the sight of the legendary bird rising over the column of enchanted flames.

“STOP HER!” Their ‘Captain’ screamed. “Draw your wands, Champions of the Day! Water spells!”

But before a single hex was thrown in direction of the Doge Court’s boats, the magical attack came.

It was the end of the world, in flames and magic.

It was-

Urmah Temen uttered words that made no sense for Ron, and the flames were diverted towards the hand which had not turned black...but this time when the first flames touched his hand, the Champion of Judgement screamed in agony.

Too many things happened too fast.

Falk jumped from the boat.

The surface of the Canal began to boil.

There was a distant shriek, like ten thousand birds where trying to sing like he did under the shower.

And Urmah Temen began to burn, both from the inside and the outside.

Ron screamed in horror...before trying to cast the Aguamenti Charm.

But the water fizzled. Whether it was badly cast or something else, he didn’t know...and there wasn’t any time at all left to think about it.

One by one, Ron saw the other rowers jumping from the boat, until there was only the dying Champion of Judgement and himself here.

And the ship itself was beginning to burn.

“I’m sorry,” Ron sobbed, before plunging into the dark water as fast as he could to avoid the flames burning on the surface.

**15 February 1995, somewhere above the Magma Chamber of Mount Etna**

Every time the Exchequer tried to Summon something into existence, the Army of Light and the Trinity were rallying quickly to put an end to it.

As a result, the followers of Osiris skilled in the magical art of Summoning, led and trained by Mulan – aka Knight Summoner – were following very few rules, but the most important one was always respected.

The Summoning ritual had to be short, and the time the Summon was allowed to be present on this world had to end before any mage sworn to Ra could analyse the mechanisms and the goals of the Exchequer.

Obeying this rule, the Exchequer had won many devastating successes. It was difficult for the Light to win a battle if the inheritors of Myrddin’s legacy were not even aware said battle had begun thousands of kilometres away. The destruction of the Goblin Fortress of Brise-Roc was a good example of this strategy, though by no means the only one.

Yet for all its successes in Summoning various entities of another Plane of existence, the Exchequer had been forced to modify its protocols for the Fourth Seal.

This time, Ra and those who sided with him could not be allowed to find the Seal. It didn’t matter if it was before, during, or after the extremely expensive artefact was activated; Osiris and his troops simply couldn’t afford that risk.

Added to this issue, there was the problem that Summoning consumed an extraordinary quantity of magic, and the services of a Summon, contrary to what thought by many wizards and witches, were absolutely not free.

This was why the Fourth Seal had been enchanted to levitate in the middle of a gigantic cavern several kilometres under the surface of this planet.

That said cavern’s appropriate scientific name was ‘magma chamber’ was a large factor in Osiris’ choice.

Situated under the active volcano of Mount Etna, and protected by some materials and wards imagined specifically for this part of the Exchequer’s victory, the Fourth Seal had remained undiscovered until today.

In this regard, the choice had proven wise: no one among the various Light organisations dedicated to the purge of the Dark had even thought a single second hiding one of the Seals below a volcano was a possibility.

And this meant that there was no one to stop a giant Salamander bigger than any magical beast participating the European Magical Tournament from being Summoned here.

For all its otherworldly nature, the entity of the Plane of Fire could not stop the laws of gravity, and immediately it fell into the magma chamber.

Some wizards would have said it was a rare failure of the Exchequer.

Those wizards would have been proven wrong quickly.

With a voraciousness that would have surprised many, the Salamander began to gorge itself on the magma which would have been in a different timeline expelled by the Etna.

And as the Salamander ate, it grew and the fire inside it grew to new hellish temperatures.

This was not a one-way transfer. Where the Salamander gained in strength, a trickle of pure fire magic was spreading in the magma chamber. The Etna volcano was not going to be the same again, and if the Sicilians believed the Etna was already too active, they had not seen anything.

The Exchequer, obviously, had predicted this...and the problems had been judged to be acceptable, especially when considering the advantages this Seal was going to grant them.

Six hundred and sixty-six seconds after the initial activation, the second phase of the Seal’s activation began.

For all the growth of the Salamander, it was levitated like a cat by the scruff of its neck. The willingness of the Summon to stay in its bath-meal of magma didn’t matter when tens of thousands of Runes and a genial combination of some of the most imaginative Aztec, Sumerian, and Egyptian rituals had united to control its moves.

Six more seconds, and a massive tunnel opened in the entrails of the Etna, and the Summon taking the shape of a titanic Salamander disappeared inside it.

The Fourth Seal remained alone, yet active.

Its role was not completely over...but other constructs were ready to take up the flame, so to speak, should an enemy discover the magnitude of the threat.

And if Archmage Ra and his forces discovered too early what they were up against?

Then the Fourth Seal would self-destroy and fall into the magma chamber of Mount Etna.

But at this hour, the Army of Light had yet to locate the Etna as the newest flashpoint that would require their anti-Dark services.

The plan of the Exchequer inside the Etna had worked. It was elsewhere their plans would face several setbacks.

**15 February 1995, Canal della Giudecca, Venice**

Fleur looked at her hands in horror.

What had she done?

Urmah Temen, Champion of Marduk, was dead.

He was dead, and she had killed him.

And with his death, her thoughts were her own again. No...they had always been her own. It was just...

They had used her.

They had used her own arrogance, and now...that was the result: fire on the canals of Venice.

Fleur had done this, and while she had been manipulated, there had been a part of her that had loved it.

There had been a part of her which had loved setting the world on fire.

And right at this moment, the Beauxbatons Champion hated it.

“What,” Fleur felt her anger boil in her stomach, and the thing that had grown in her chest answered, giving her more bright, warm magic, “have you done to me, Ares’ pet butcher?”

“Nothing you didn’t really want to do,” Malatesti laughed, as his gondola passed left of her immobilised boat, her rowers having stopped their effort to avoid the burning debris of the Day’s boat.

“WHAT. HAVE. YOU. DONE. TO. ME.”

“Don’t worry, it will be revealed in due time.” The Dark Doge had the gall to laugh harder. “Now if you excuse me, I have several big fishes to catch.”

A click of his fingers, and suddenly enormous fishing nets rose from the depths of the Giudecca Canal.

The six survivors of the Day Court – Falk and his rowers, minus Urmah Temen – had no chance to escape. They had their wands, but so had the Legionnaires who rushed with their small boats from the positions where they had been hidden.

This had all been planned from the start.

This had all been planned. The bastard had used her.

“I think I am going to use a parade on the Plaza di San Marco with these prisoners,” the Dark Doge continued, infuriating her even more than she was, “and if the Day King rushes to save his subordinates, so much for the better.”

“You used me.”

Fleur had always felt the presence of the Angel of Life in her soul. But for the first time, it was...it was not there. There was...only something good. Something incredibly powerful.

There was...***Fire***.

“Oh please, tell me the Light didn’t use the same way.” The unrepentant bastard scoffed. “And please don’t say I forced you to kiss me, you were enthusiastic, I recall-“

“Song of the Stars, Radiance of the Pyramids, Empire of the Sun,” Fleur spat after drawing her wand, “SOLARIA IUDICIA DIVINA!”

This was the spell called the Divine Justice.

It was a Dark Wizard-killer.

There were few defences the Black Witches and Wizards had for it.

But instead of a golden ray of utter destruction and the appropriate lights marking it as successfully cast, nothing happened.

No, it was worse than that. Instead of the bastard dying, it was her wand which was reduced to ashes.

Fleur felt suddenly exhausted. She was weak in the knees, her mouth...she was thirsty, and there was something very displeased in her chest. Something that shrieked stridently, as if telling her she was in the wrong.

“No...I...what...”

“Fire and Light are magics that have a lot in common,” the Beauxbatons Champion heard the Dark Doge speak in the distance, “but they are not the same. And throwing spells like that when you’re in a spiritual transition...this was not a good idea.”

“I will...kill...”

Everything was getting too blurry, and there was a splash near her.

“Don’t worry, my Queen. I will watch over you while you transition.”

**15 February 1995, San Giorgio Maggiore’s Island, Venice**

One of the many good points about being a Hydra Animagus, was that Alexandra didn’t need any vision magnifying device or magical spell to watch what happened on the other side of the Giudecca Canal, despite said waterway being many times the width of the Grand Canal.

And the Basilisk Slayer had a perfect view of Frode Falk being dragged out of the water, squirming like an enormous ridiculous fish, as the nets were clearly enchanted to prevent him transforming into his inner animal or using whatever magical talent he had.

One by one, the members of the Day Court were removed from the Giudecca Canal, and soon near-unbreakable chains replaced the nets.

Alexandra would be a monumental liar to say that despite everything that had happened in the last few minutes, she didn’t enjoy the spectacle.

“Frode Falk, Champion of the Day Court and the Light, servant of Wisdom. Ulrich Fuchs of Durmstrang, Warlock of the Day and member of the Trinity. Yaroslav Leskov of Durmstrang, Guard of the Day Court. Maksim Gribov of Durmstrang, Guard and member of the Army of Light. And...this one wasn’t mentioned by Krum’s reports.”

“That’s because he isn’t a Durmstrang student,” Lucrezia told her in a tone that was respectful in the extreme, “his name is Francesco Pepoli, he’s playing the Warlock, and he’s a student of the Scuola Regina.”

“Never heard about him,” the Potter Heiress confessed.

“You were involved tangentially in the deaths of a few of his cousins during the Battle of Hogsmeade,” the Succubus informed her.

“Really?”

“House Pepoli has...strong magical ties with Nephilim.”

“Figures,” Alexandra returned to watching the spectacle of the Doge Court humiliating the Day. “Well, and last but least, there’s Ron Weasley, Guard of Hogwarts.”

What the red-haired Gryffindor was doing with them, Alexandra hadn’t the faintest idea. Rowers’ physical abilities had to be complimentary, and the youngest Weasley wizard was at least one head smaller than the other wizards he had been rowing with.

And she watched him, Alexandra was sure that while Longbottom had drunk from the Grail, Ron Weasley had not.

“The Day Court will try to free them.”

Alexandra grunted in approval.

“I suppose they have to. With the death of Urmah Temen, they have lost permanently one of their Warlocks. And Falk being a prisoner would already be a severe blow in its own right. Having several Warlocks and Guards in chains with this fanatic can’t be called anything but a calamitous defeat.”

And Malatesti had done it alone.

To say Alexandra and everyone else had underestimated the Champion of Ares...today was a lesson why it was a very bad idea to do so.

Yes, Malatesti must have some support from the Exchequer...but...no, no, but.

This had been a remarkable strategy, that was all there was to acknowledge.

Though Alexandra had to say she was a bit bemused watching the Champion of War leaving his gondola carrying the unconscious Fleur Delacour the traditional way a groom would carry his bride.

“The other members of the Doge Court are waiting us on the Plaza di San Marco.” Alexandra turned and left the scene of aquatic devastation behind her.

“Yes.” The Champion of Lust didn’t even bother to deny it.

“Now that I think about it, Poliakov looked way too drunk.” The Ravenclaw Champion grimaced. “An Alchemical-based Potion that can end the moment Malatesti or someone else gives him the antidote?”

“Yes.”

Alexandra sighed.

“That would have been useful to know beforehand.”

As the crowd thinned, the two Champions began to walk away faster.

“I...there are things I was not allowed to reveal.”

The Champion of Death did not know what was worse: that Lucrezia seemed genuinely sorry, or that the Exchequer had acted this way because they had planned her reaction with a disturbing degree of accuracy, and made sure she wouldn’t be in position to intervene.

“Malatesti activated the Fourth Seal. I felt a sensation I never forgot. Does it have to do with a giant Summon fire taking the shape of a Salamander, by any chance?”

“Yes,” the Succubus replied quietly, “yes, it does.”

Well, she had asked the question, hadn’t she?

The worst part was...it made a disturbing amount of sense. Ra had brought the Grail to Venice, and that wasn’t some powerless artefact you could destroy by turning your tongue seven times in your mouth. You had to bring something incredibly powerful to the battle.

Something that could damage in a significant fashion an artefact that couldn’t be damaged.

The Hell Salamander qualified. Its inferno may, in theory, be capable of melting the Grail...if Ra didn’t have a counter for it.

“Your patrons have been killing two birds with one stone.” Here again, Alexandra didn’t make it a question, and the Champion of Venus didn’t bother with a denial. “If the Salamander can do the job, great, victory is won and all of that. But if it doesn’t work, you will have...”

There would be only six Light Powers left. Alexandra had to admit it was a brilliant move, though the method...there was a reason why the Exchequer was so feared by those aware of its existence.

Six Powers of the Dark. Six Powers of the Light. And one Power of Fire.

Ra had no doubt taken extreme measures for a Power of Light to not be turned into a Dark Power. But for all the destruction and the death it had brought...the Summon Mulan had tied with the Fourth Seal was one of Fire, not of the Dark.

More worrying question: did the Exchequer plan to stop here, or were they going to do the same with all the Powers?

“This day is bringing many interesting and worrying questions.” Alexandra cleared her throat. “I humbly wish to have the answers. I suppose my request has to go to the Queen at the very least, no?”

“Err...” for a couple of seconds, Lucrezia Sforza was taken aback. “Yes, it does. Is it because you want to know how the Archmage of Light is going to react?”

“Not exactly,” Alexandra shook her head, behind the mask of the Winter Queen, “though I won’t deny it will be a factor. The Light Avatar must have felt what you did to the ‘Phoenix Knight’. Unless he has suddenly become blind, deaf, and magically inept, he will have felt the Fourth Seal activating too. This time he is going to counterattack, and it won’t be limited to a potential lethal attack like his servants did on the Grand Canal.”

And it was...bad enough. His first act was likely going to try to free all the prisoners of the Day Court. With the death of Marduk’s Champion, Falk being prisoner was an enormous problem for the Archmage.

“But no, the reason I want to have a good idea if we’re still on the same page at all is because of *trust*, Lucrezia. Chaos is going to want your head on a spike, and for once, I won’t exactly blame her for her new negative emotions. We have to stay united, or the next days are going to be a disaster.”

“I understand your opinion.” It would have been better if the Succubus had said she agreed with it, but Alexandra was going to take what she could from this debacle. “I am going to need...time. You aren’t going to launch a new operation today?”

“Are you asking because you are worried about our chances of success, or because Poliakov is supposed to activate another Seal on the Plaza di San Marco?”

If Lucrezia had not a mask covering the entirety of her mouth, Alexandra was sure she would be able to see her staring with her mouth wide open.

“But no,” the Night Queen continued, “you don’t have to worry about us trying to do something reckless. In the next minutes, the majority of the Doge Court will be there. I am not crazy enough to believe we will be able to fight our way through that sort of opposition, grab the Aquamarine Key, and escape without losses of our own.”

They would need a small army of skeletons to have good odds, and that was assuming the Day Court wouldn’t seize the opportunity to stab them in the back.

“Go. We will meet again tonight.”

“Yes...my Queen.”

**15 February 1995, Plaza di San Marco, San Marco District, Venice**

Enzo Gregorio had decided to leave his home city to come and watch the Venetian Carnival for the first time, and it was exceeded all his expectations!

The costumes and the musical performances were superb! Everything was eventful and incredibly entertaining!

And the interschool competition organised by the authorities of Venice? Priceless! No, Enzo Gregorio didn’t regret a single second the Liras he had had to spend to spend. For the spectacles and the fake battles he had been able to witness, each every coin had been an incredible investment.

The ‘Battle of the Sloppy Fishes’ had been a comedy that still made him giggling when he thought of it, but the ‘Sea Jousting Race’ had been an even better performance, in many ways! The jousting on the Grand Canal had been fantastic, and the spectacular firework display which had literally set another canal aflame for several seconds was something that he would remember for decades!

And it was not over. Now the self-proclaimed Doge Court was organising a grand parade, with dancers and musicians...and of course all the ‘defeated Champions of the Day’. And they’d all changed their costumes for the very ‘traditional’ black and yellow of convicts! The masks were black and yellow too, and they were all ‘frozen’ in large grimaces!

“Here come the criminals!” The Baron Harlequin proclaimed, his drunken style alas a thing of the past. Too bad, Enzo had loved how the performer had jousted on the Grand Canal. “We remind our honourable public that it is absolutely forbidden to throw tomatoes on the prisoners!”

The malicious smirk which came after could not have been more exaggerated.

And the enormous tomato that caught a prisoner-clothed comedian in the chest a second later was absolutely hilarious.

“We will have our vengeance!” The prisoner leading the procession spat, and the spectators cheered. “You think you have won? We will-“

A second tomato – certainly filled with something like ketchup to burst into such explosions of red liquid – caught him in the head and interrupted the tirade.

“Let it be known that the prisoner refuses to obey the sovereign laws of the Serene Republic of Venice!” The buffoon pointed an accusing finger towards his ‘prisoner’. “In the name of the Doge, whose magnificence is only matched by his megalomania...”

Thousands of voices clapped their hands and shouted their support.

“I condemn you to twelve nights and days of prison in our darkest and most humid cell near the Bridge of Sighs!” The actor playing the role of ‘Baron Harlequin’ finished.

“You didn’t even win the race the way you were supposed to!”

“Add a ritual of purification to the list of punishments!”

“How dare you!”

At first, Enzo Gregorio wondered what the clown meant by a ‘ritual of purification’. He had not long to wait.

Clad in blue armours, three performers – the ‘Guards of the Doge Court’ – advanced to place themselves on the right and left of the Baron Harlequin.

And in their hands, were very large buckets.

All of them were filled with soapy water.

“**You have been captured. This is your Judgement. By the powers bestowed upon me...let’s begin the purification ritual**!”

Enzo shivered for a few seconds, wondering why the actor had suddenly decided to speak so strangely...before laughing with everyone else as the first bucket of water was slowly dumped onto the head of the ‘convict’.

The scream of rage looked almost authentic...and best of all the moment the bucket was empty, the tomato bombardment began.

“And now I offer you this Key, insolent criminal! I promise you, it doesn’t open the door of your very uncomfortable cell!”

The spectators of the Carnival, Enzo included, applauded and cheered.

**15 February 1995, not far away from the French Atlantic Coast**

Long before Hogwarts was built, the Megalith of Ys had been one of the most famous magical relics of the European continent.

It was ancient. Indeed, no one knew who had turned the Megalith into a magical artefact. Not even Osiris and Ra, and the two Avatars were ancient beyond reckoning.

This had been before their time.

The Megalith had not been sculpted by human hands, save the contact of the hands of the witches and wizards who included it into their solstice ceremonies.

It was, however, painted.

Runes and plenty of magical glyphs which had come before the field was recognised as a type of magical art by its own were everywhere on the Megalith, and since the single standing stone was somewhere around seven metres tall and it took approximately a coven of a dozen joining hands to properly make a circle around it, this was a lot of magical glyphs.

Between the Ley Lines under it and countless generations of magical beings pouring their magic into celebration rituals, the Megalith and its surroundings had become infused with quantities of magic rarely seen in the world.

But the most remarkable quality of the Megalith lied elsewhere.

Somehow, thousands of years ago, magical had managed to create a connection between Planes and the heart of the Monolith. The Plane of Water and this world, to be accurate.

Thus there was a large hole on the southern face of the Megalith. It was not big. An adult would be able to place his arm into it with no difficulty, but two arms would struggle.

And from this flaw that had not been made by tools, a respectable quantity of water was flowing out.

It was magical water. It could keep thirst away for days with mere drops of it in your mouth. A single vial of it could, with the proper preparations, create highly-complex Potions that would have been unstable otherwise.

The water, miraculous gift from another Plane, was used, but always with great parsimony.

The Witches of Ys who guarded the Megalith, while ignoring most of its secrets, knew there were many things one couldn’t tolerate doing with the Megalith, without breaking the covenant which had led to the creation of this never-extinguished source.

This was why when the Archmage in person had come in person and told them he needed their water to help in the creation of an artefact breaking all the laws of magic and men, the Witches had refused.

It had been the right decision.

But Ra, while forced to depart when confronted by over fifty witches of redoubtable power, returned mere days after the first stand-off.

And this time, the Avatar of Light had come with an army.

The carnage had been particularly extensive, and though the Trinity’s soldiers emerged eventually victorious, the number of Light wizards who survived could be counted on both hands.

Unfortunately, only Ra’s survival mattered, and the brother of Osiris, thanks to his Phoenix Animagus form, would not suffer from any consequences from that battle.

One of the first things necessary to forge Excalibur was under the Light’s control.

Ra collected a vast quantity of magical water, and then departed, but not before calling up more wizards and witches to play the roles of Light guardians for the Megalith of Ys.

As always, his arrogance played a key role in its defeat. The local population, angered beyond measure that most of the Witches of Ys had been butchered, fought against the men and the women proclaiming their new ‘masters’.

They were not strong enough to win this war alone, but the knowledge of the violence and the reasons behind the casus belli rapidly spread, and the Exchequer’s attention was drawn to Ys.

In this situation, the enemy of one’s enemy was very much an ally.

The high-ranked mages of the Dark came in great numbers, and took great pleasure in slaying the Trinity defilers.

But they had arrived too late. The connection to the Plane of Water had been broken, possibly forever. A Champion of Judgement, before being slain, cursed the Megalith and the lands nearby.

The Witches of Ys were broken by this war. The majority of their wise and powerful practitioners were dead, and the young ones had no means to recover certain secrets, for those were on the Megalith, and the defilers had tried to add as many disgusting substances as they could on its stone before they went to meet its judgement. But they would not forget. Several women would marry and found new magical covens. From one of them, Morgane, future Queen of the Exchequer, would be born. And when the call for arms would echo across a continent as the prelude to the Battle of Camlann, the last Witches of Ys would fight under Mordred’s banner.

After this cataclysmic battle which ended an era of magic in an awful bloody tragedy, the Exchequer was forced to move away the Megalith of Ys.

Osiris himself had come and been unable to replicate the Water Summoning, but the King of the Exchequer was unwilling to take the chance his brother could be successful where he had failed. A fake Megalith was spectacularly destroyed, while the real one was spirited away.

Fifteen hundred years passed.

The Megalith of Ys, many of its glyphs restored, had been moved from secret hide-out to secret hide-out, until it was left there, in a great enchanted bubble, cloaked underwater by the Atlantic Ocean.

It had a Seal underneath which could only be activated under very specific circumstances. For decades, these conditions were not fulfilled.

Today this was no longer the case.

Judgement as a Power had cursed the Megalith of Ys.

But today, Judgement was powerless.

In time, the Light Power would unquestionably try to claim another Champion.

But today, it had no anchor in this world, no means to intervene.

And with the Dark wizards and witches having themselves provoked this weakness, there was no hesitation whatsoever about the decision to strike.

There was a colossal explosion, and the single standing stone rose from the oceanic waters, along with the miniature island that was supporting it.

It rose for quite a long time, and didn’t stop until it reached seventy-seven metres above the ocean.

A second later, the equivalent of a torrent of water began to flow out of the Megalith’s ‘flaw’.

The Fifth Seal had done what many generations had thought to be utterly impossible.

And this was only the Exchequer’s opening moves where the Megalith of Ys was involved.

**15 February 1995, Plaza di San Marco, San Marco District, Venice**

Neville was utterly furious.

The Fifth Seal had broken, and the Enemy had done it by humiliating the Day Court.

The Seal was no more, and the Doge Court had made a *farcical comedy* out of it.

The fists of the Champion of Fate tightened.

And this wasn’t the only thing Malatesti and his brutes had insulted them with.

The convict costumes.

Were they counting as the number of costumes authorised for the Task or not? A part of him wanted to scoff and say no, but the truth of the matter was that the Boy-Who-Lived wasn’t sure.

“They are taking them to the Ducal Palace,” Giovanni Ruspoli said, as the spectators mercifully stopped sending those stupid tomatoes at the captured members of the Day Court. And naturally, seconds later, this buffoon of Poliakov threw more water at them to remove all the red paint from the yellow-back ‘convict costumes’.

“I know.” Neville replied with ill-humour. “I was here when this clown of ‘Baron Harlequin’ said it, and I am not deaf.”

The Venetian Champion glared at him, but Neville returned the favour with another expression of contempt. Ruspoli had been supposed to be a key asset due to his knowledge of the battleground, but so far, he had only proven that his theoretical knowledge often didn’t match the reality of things on the battlefield.

“The Baron Harlequin could have lied,” the other Champion answered. “In fact, I expected him to lie.”

“Why?”

“Because while it’s exciting for the spectators, the Palace where the Doges ruled Venice before Napoleon came and put an end to the Republic of Venice isn’t warded or prepared to keep wizards prisoner. You can call it ‘Ducal Palace’, ‘Palace of the Doges’ or whatever strikes you as a good idea, but it is a museum, and it has been this way for a long-time. Worse, it is a non-magical museum, not like the one we have at-“

“Then it will be all the easier to free our prisoners!”

“That wasn’t my point, *my King*,” Giovanni told him acidly, and Neville had to fight his urge to not claw the face of this insolent upstart bookworm.

“Then what is your point?”

“My point is that Malatesti has very large and very secure prison cells in his household palace of Ca’Bellicosa. Your sources of information confirmed it. My spies said the same thing. Everyone knows it. The warmonger himself spread plenty of rumours himself about it. Why by the canals of this city would he bother using a historical prison that has proven in the past it can’t keep prisoners true wizards when he has another one far more secure in this very city?”

Neville grimaced. As much as he didn’t like Ruspoli, this time the other Champion had made a good point.

“You think it is a trap.”

“No, *my King*, I am *certain* this is a trap,” the student of the Scuola Regina replied seriously. “This is just the same obvious bait this bloodthirsty maniac pulled with the ‘Sea Jousting Race’, only he was even less subtle here, if it was at all possible.”

“That’s...an interesting stance.”

“Oh by all the bridges of the Lagoon!” Giovanni Ruspoli rolled his eyes and made gestures of annoyance behind his grey-red mask of merchant-aristocrat. “Poliakov, acting as the Baron Harlequin, gave the Aquamarine Key to Falk in view of everyone! If that wasn’t an invitation to the Night Queen to come and slit his throat in order to recover her prize, I don’t know what it is!”

“The Night Queen and her Court of the Damned don’t have the strength to fight the Doge Court in a true battle,” the Champion of Fate replied peevishly. “They lost the race today, much like we did.”

“And yet I don’t see any of them here being dragged away in these ridiculous costumes of yellow-black.”

“Be careful about what you’re saying, Ruspoli. My patience has limits.”

Another Champion rushed in his direction, trying his best to avoid a collision with the spectators. To his relief, it was Cedric Diggory.

“We must get out of here,” the Hufflepuff Champion said. “Malatesti is coming back.”

“Good, we will-“

“I think he got an Armament Key somewhere,” the member of the House of Helga Hufflepuff interrupted. “And it gave him a tracking artefact.”

“Good, I will-“

“I am getting immediately out of here, Champion Diggory.” Ruspoli nodded in appreciation. “My thanks for the warning.”

“You won’t disobey my orders!” Neville growled threateningly.

The two Champions looked at him, and the Boy-Who-Lived didn’t like at all the defiance in their expressions, even if most of it was undoubtedly hidden by their masks.

“I can, and I will,” the Venetian Champion was the first to answer. “So far, I have yet to hear an intelligent strategy coming from your mouth, my *King*. And with Temen incinerated and Falk prisoner, two of your enforcers are gone. I will ask for a vote tonight to restrict your kingly privileges. Goodbye.”

“This is not part of the Task’s rules!”

“Err...” Cedric coughed. “As a matter of fact, the Judges hinted yesterday that it was, under certain circumstances...”

**16 February 1995, Ca’Bellicosa Palace, Cannaregio District, Venice**

The moment the blue eyes began to realise who she was facing, the emotions in them were strangely similar to...relief?

“Am I dead?” the half-Veela asked.

Alexandra chuckled.

“Let me reassure you, oh dear Champion: you’re well and truly alive. You are in your private room of Ca’Bellicosa. Romeo Malatesti carried you bridal-style across half of Venice in front of a very enthusiastic crowd. Everyone now wonders if you are his betrothed.”

“I would rather die,” the blonde-haired French witch muttered in a low tone.

Alexandra raised an eyebrow.

“Can I assume, then, that your vibrant act of kissing at the beginning of the Sea Jousting Race was due to the Alchemy and other magical substances coursing in your veins?”

The Champion of the Doge groaned loudly and tried to hide her head in her hands.

“Oh no, I really did that...” the next words in French that were uttered were not really flattering for anyone...and Alexandra sometimes thought that she was gaining way too much knowledge of insults in foreign languages.

“Wait a minute,” Fleur Delacour rose up suddenly. “If you’re not a hallucination or some nightmare, how are you here in the first place? This room is indeed part of Ca’Bellicosa! You aren’t supposed to be here!”

“Would you believe me,” Alexandra smirked while crossing her arms, “if I said I disguised myself as a servant and walked leisurely through the main gates, and everyone assumed I was part of the palace’s staff?”

“No,” Fleur Delacour replied frostily, “try again.”

The Potter Heiress sighed theatrically.

“Ah well, it was worth trying, I suppose.”

The truth was, the Ravenclaw Champion had really stunned a servant, by which she meant a Guard of the Doge Court, and temporarily copied his magical signature with a complicated Enchantment Daphne Greengrass had found recently. The Charm was illegal as hell, was ill-advised if you didn’t have a huge magical reserve, and would not last more than one hour.

“Anyway. As much as I wish it to be otherwise, my time is precious. I came here for several reasons. The first was to determine how many of the deeds you committed during the Sea Jousting Race were voluntarily.”

“I didn’t want this!” the half-Veela hissed. “I didn’t want to kill Urmah Temen! I wasn’t fond of him, we didn’t know each other well, and he had a fascination with torture, but I didn’t want to...” the grimace of horror was genuine.

Alexandra, after a second of hesitation, decided to not remark on the hypocrisy of the French girl. Apparently, it was optimal to burn Dark Champions wherever you found them, but the moment it was a Light one, it was awful and a crime against humanity or something equally abhorrent.

“I didn’t want any of this to happen.” Fleur Delacour gloomily finished. “Maybe I should have chosen the Day Court...”

“If you decided to go for the Day Court, Ra would have forced you to drink for the Grail, and you would be in an even worse position, about as powerful as what you showed on the Grand Canal...at the cost of decades of your life-expectancy.”

“Impressive words...but you ignore, oh Champion of Chaos, that what this bastard of Dark War did to me must have cost me years of life.”

“As a matter of life, it didn’t,” Alexandra took a few seconds to enjoy the shock on the face of the Champion that had tried to kill her twice. “I stole a few papers in the Healer’s room next to you. The moment you will have completely recovered from your exhaustion, you will be in a superb health. The Exchequer expect your life-expectancy will increase by several centuries when your body and your magical score are finally stabilised.”

“I don’t think they want me to live for several centuries.”

“You would be surprised.” Actually, Alexandra had been relatively surprised Osiris and his Knights had given strict orders that Fleur Delacour was to live, and had even engineered several schemes behind the scenes to achieve that goal. At least they had been quite honest about it in their correspondence with the Malatesti Healer.

Alexandra had thought there was something wrong about Morgane, Queen of the Exchequer, sparing the life of Fleur Delacour on the night of Samhain a year and a half ago. Now her suspicions were more than confirmed.

“They don’t need me now that the Fourth Seal is done.”

“Actually,” the green-eyed witch corrected, “when you were unconscious, Poliakov dealt with the Fifth Seal...certainly on Malatesti’s instructions.”

“Wonderful...but it doesn’t erase what I said before.”

“I think, in my humble opinion, that you’re wrong. They still need you. They want a former Light Champion to transform into a true Phoenix Animagus, only one which will be tied to the Plane of Fire, not of the Light. That way you will have a form of near-immortality, but a far more restricted one, not to the level of Ra and Myrddin, of course-“

“Ridiculous,” Fleur Delacour scoffed, with a voice and an arrogance which reminded Alexandra why she disliked the older witch. “There are no Fire Powers. No one ever worshipped entities from there, not in this Age of Magic, and certainly not before the Statute was established!”

Alexandra let the Champion of Life complete her tirade...and then spoke the words that had made her shiver when Lyudmila provided a counter-argument two hours ago.

“What about *Surtr*?”

“What about...no, no, no...” Well, the Veela reacted worse than her, and Alexandra’s hadn’t been really positive in the first place. “They can’t do that!”

“The activation of the Fourth Seal proves the opposite, I think.”

“You don’t understand...it is ***Ragnarok*** we are talking about!”

The word really made Alexandra shiver.

“It’s very likely, yes. And for the record, no, I wasn’t aware of what the Exchequer intended before today.”

“An apology, really?”

“Well, it is a bit my fault you’re in this situation,” Alexandra lightly remarked.

“Yes, because you almost killed me during the First Task!”

The Champion of the Morrigan shrugged, before drawing her rapier.

“I seem to remember someone tried to kill me first. Don’t try to play innocent Delacour, it doesn’t suit you.”

“Mighty words from someone who is coming rapier in hand. Go ahead, oh Empress of Lightning. I am still too weak to stand on my own, and I don’t have a wand anymore. I am alone. This is your chance. Finish what you’ve begun during the First Task.”

Alexandra couldn’t stop herself, she laughed.

“This isn’t funny!” the blonde hissed.

“I completely disagree,” Alexandra giggled. “You see, Delacour, I have been given a task by the Morrigan. And it also gives me the opportunity to prove you that contrary to the Light, *I am going to let you choose your path*.”

“And if,” the daughter of the Minister of Magical France asked hesitantly, “I choose to side again with the Light?”

“Then the next time we will battle each other, I will kill you.”

Alexandra bared her teeth, and several of them transform into miniature fangs of the Lernaean hydra.

“Any other questions?”

**16 February 1995, Ca’Luce Palace, San Polo District, Venice**

“Where is the incapable that loves to call himself our King?”

If the situation wasn’t so tense, Cedric would have tried a joke how the ‘where is Longbottom?’ had shifted to ‘where is the Day King?’ several days ago before taking a nosedive for a spectacular crash.

But the atmosphere was poisoned beyond redemption, and thus Cedric avoided any insinuation which might detonate the magical fireworks.

“I believe he is still in the eastern wing, Gauthier,” the Champion of Hufflepuff replied, seeing no one else seated on the couches of the vast golden-themed room desired to open his mouth.

“What? But that’s been three hours!”

“Three hours and eleven minutes,” Ruspoli commented after checking his watch, a very old and expensive model by the looks of it. “But who’s counting?”

Graham Montague tried not to laugh...and the result was like he coughed many, many times.

“We’re speaking of the wing-“

“That no one is allowed to access, yes.”

“No one but *him*.”

The accent put on it made clear that Montague was not referring to the Gryffindor Champion.

“I don’t like the influence this man has over your fellow School Champion, Diggory.”

“I agree...” Cedric cleared his throat, “though I don’t think we can call it ‘influence’ given what we have seen. It’s far, far more than that.”

Several heads turned in the direction of Henri de Condé, who, as far as everyone knew, was one of the rare chosen who had been invited into the ‘Forbidden Wing’. But as usual these days, the Beauxbatons Champions was morose and tight-lipped, and didn’t seem to even listen to their conversation.

“Have you spoken with your Headmaster?”

“I have spoken with Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, yes.” Cedric admitted. “And yes, he is as concerned as you are. In fact, I think he is even more worried.”

Graham Montague snorted loudly.

“Of course he is. His precious Boy-Who-Lived is behaving more erratically than Falk. Given how bad things are, Longbottom is certainly going to kill a spectator in cold blood before the end of this Task, and that won’t look good for a certain political faction at home.”

Part of Cedric Diggory’s mind was appalled by such a cynical view of the situation. The rest was telling him that for once, the Slytherin Champion may very well be right.

“Longbottom was the wrong Day King for this Task,” Giovanni Ruspoli said bluntly.

Surprisingly, it was Angelina Johnson who answered it. And while the athletic Gryffindor Girl was ‘only’ a Warlock, she had gained a lot of respect thanks to her assiduous work ethics.

“He was the wrong choice to be the Gryffindor Champion, period. If there had not been a curious series of ‘lucky’ performances during the preliminaries, especially the last one, he would never have been a substitute...or at least not one so high-placed after Geoffrey.”

“What happened during the preliminaries happened at your school’s preliminaries too?” Lucas Gauthier looked aghast, and Cedric didn’t blame him. “How was this not investigated? Blatant cheating like that must be punished!”

“For the same reason he was allowed to be the Day King after the Third Task,” Angelina shrugged. “It is extremely to tell someone has cheated, but quite another affair to prove it.”

“Well, he has to be removed.” Giovanni Ruspoli declared after several seconds of silence. “I know there is no rule to lay the foundations for it, but we can’t keep him as the King of the Court for a day longer. I was expecting for him to be angry when we presented our written protests; I didn’t expect him to simply walk away and force us to wait over three hours. Do you agree?”

“I do,” Cedric nodded, and he was followed by Lucas Gauthier and Graham Montague. As ever, Henri de Condé seemed lost in his thoughts so deeply that if he wasn’t breathing, the Hufflepuff would have begun to be worried for his life.

“Thank you,” the sole Champion of the Scuola Regina clapped in his hands. “I suggest approaching the Judges when they arrive at the Caffè Florian tomorrow morning and-“

Cormac McLaggen stormed into the common room, an expression of fear carved upon his face. Cedric felt a deep pit open in his stomach. The recruitment of this Gryffindor had been something he was still very uneasy about, and not just because Cormac was boisterous and about as subtle as Alexandra Potter when she launched her lightning battle-magic. It was a sign of how unreliable Longbottom had become. In the most negative scenarios Cedric had imagined, Cormac would have been made a Guard.

But no, their ‘Day King’ had decided to make him a Warlock.

“Where is he?” The Gryffindor asked, in a voice that was definitely trying to catch his breath.

“Longbottom?”

“No, Minister Fudge! Of course I mean Longbottom, Montague!”

“He’s still barricaded with our ‘host’ in the eastern wing,” Cedric replied before the conversation degenerated into an unbearable bickering, like it too often did. “Why?”

“There’s a whole cohort of Death Eaters attacking the first line of wards outside!” McLaggen exclaimed.

Cedric gaped. Death Eaters? Here?

“Ridiculous,” Montague protested. “I am sure I would be aware if-“ the Slytherin closed his mouth as everyone turned his head towards him, but the panic in his eyes wasn’t a feint, or at least Cedric didn’t think Montague was such a good liar.

A heartbeat later, several alarms began to shriek.

Then a colossal explosion arrived to their ears, and the walls of Ca’Luce shook.

“To arms,” Henri de Condé jumped on his feet, suddenly alert and vigilant. “All of you, forget the masks and the costumes. Take up your foci and all the other weapons you are skilled with. This is going to be a long night.”

**Author’s note**: This was not part of the plan...

The Fourth Task will continue in chapter 103, whose tentative title is: *The Long Night*.

Needless to say, not everyone will be alive to see the next dawn...

And since a lot of readers have wanted it:

***The Carnival Civil War***

**The Champions of the Day Court:**

Neville Longbottom, Champion of Fate – Day King – Hogwarts

Frode Falk, Champion of Frigg (Wisdom) – Durmstrang

Cedric Diggory – Hogwarts

Graham Montague – Hogwarts

Henri de Condé, Champion of Horus – Beauxbatons

Lucas Gauthier – Beauxbatons

Giovanni Ruspoli – Scuola Regina

**The Champions of the Night Court:**

Alexandra Potter, Champion of the Morrigan (Death) – Night Queen – Hogwarts

Viktor Krum – Durmstrang

Lyudmila Romanov, Champion of Loki (Chaos) – Durmstrang

Ambre de Courtois – Beauxbatons

Eleonora da Riva, Champion of Vesta (Innocence) – Scuola Regina

Lucrezia Sforza, Champion of Venus (Desire) – Scuola Regina

**The Champions of the Doge Court:**

Romeo Malatesti, Champion of Ares (War) – Doge – Scuola Regina

Yegor Poliakov, Champion of Seth (Confusion) – Durmstrang

Fleur Delacour, Champion of [REDACTED] – Beauxbatons

**Dead Participants**:

Urmah Temen, Champion of Marduk (Judgement) – Day Court, Warlock

**Currently enjoying the hospitality of the Doge’s cells**:

Frode Falk, Champion of Frigg (Wisdom) – Day Court, Champion (Durmstrang)

Francesco Pepoli – Day Court, Warlock (Scuola Regina)

Ulrich Fuchs – Day Court, Warlock (Durmstrang)

Ron Weasley – Day Court, Guard (Hogwarts)

Yaroslav Leskov – Day Court, Guard (Durmstrang)

Maksim Gribov – Day Court, Guard (Durmstrang)