**Chapter 103**

**The Long Night**

“*Many thought the world couldn’t change in one night. They were proven wrong in the worst way imaginable*.” Words attributed to Gilderoy Lockhart, 16 February 1995.

**16 February 1995, Galleria dell’ Academia, Dorsoduro, Venice**

“Roksana Vulchanova has a lot of talent.”

Alexandra wasn’t in the least surprised by the remark.

“I would have been astonished if the opposite was true. Our dear Dark Queen is not friendly, but she surrounds herself with skilled witches.” The Champion of the Morrigan paused. “Did you think she would tolerate the presence of a Durmstrang equivalent of Goyle, Susan?”

“Well, when you look at it like that...no,” her girlfriend admitted. “I’ve learned a lot about how to infuse my magic into the skeletons you use.”

“I’m happy for you. It must be...exciting rediscovering part of the lore that makes your family famous centuries ago.”

“Infamous, you mean,” Susan chuckled, “and yes. This gave me new ideas.”

“Do those ideas include endless armies of invincible skeletons?” Alexandra asked hopefully.

The red-haired Hufflepuff sighed.

“I will remind you, dear Lady chosen by Death, that skeletons, at the end of the day, are just that, skeletons. We can make them harder to destroy, we can enchant them to reassemble after someone tries to transform them into a pile of bones, and we can carve Runes upon them to make them easier to control. But they aren’t golems. They aren’t able to endure attacks from over a hundred wizards at once.”

“Susan!” Alexandra gasped theatrically. “You broke my dream! I was just imagining Longbottom and several of his accomplices be dragged into the depths of the Venetian Lagoon by our skeletons!”

“You have really weird dreams, Alex. Though given how unbearable and arrogant Longbottom has become, I suppose I can’t blame you too much.”

“Yes...” Alexandra supposed she could be honest, at least with her girlfriend. “It’s such a waste. Our dear Boy-Who-Lived had potential. Everyone recognised that, and Herbology and Defence Against the Dark Arts showed he could excel when he was interested in something. Instead...well, once again, everything was wasted.”

“Err...didn’t the Grail give him the mastery of every talent his bloodline could deliver?”

“Yes, yes it did. And what do you suppose this is going to do to his already dangerously low work ethic? The Grail handed him everything on a gold tray, nothing more, nothing less. It is the culmination of a single concept: that Neville Longbottom, as the Champion of Fate, won’t have to work a single day of his life for what others will need decades to master.”

The next minute of their walk in the different halls of the Galleria dell’ Academia were done in complete silence, save the sound of their shoes. Alexandra had deactivated all the security systems of the art museum for the night before entering, and as it was just past midnight, the Galleria was asleep, as was Venice.

“Are you going to kill him?”

“I don’t know,” Alexandra answered truthfully. “It all depends on how certain events are going to play out, I suppose.”

“Speaking of certain events...what do you intend to do tonight, Alex? I have no problem sacrificing a few hours of sleep to have a frank conversation where we won’t be spied upon...but the Galleria dell’ Academia is a bit of a strange choice, even if I know you enjoy watching Venetian paintings.”

“Ah, that.” The Potter Heiress grimaced, before admitting her goal. “I want answers, Susan.”

“About?”

“About everything that happened today...I mean, yesterday,” it was past midnight, so a new day had officially begun.

“A noble purpose,” her girlfriend commented lightly, “but shouldn’t you and I be in our costumes, instead of donning...well, I my Hogwarts robes, and you this sportswear you seemed to like so much?” Alexandra raised an eyebrow. “Not to mention, I’m pretty sure the Day Court is at Ca’Luce, and the Doge Court is guarding the Ducal Palace and their prisoners. As for the minds behind the Fourth Task...they’re at Ca’Sforza.”

“A good summary of the strategic situation, Susan.”

Coincidence or not, Alexandra suddenly felt the pulse, and stopped.

Turning her head to her left, there was indeed the large painting she expected to find.

And it represented the Plaza di San Marco as well as the Ducal Palace, or at least how the two had looked like several centuries ago.

Alexandra took the Emerald Key that she had kept in her pocket and pushed a tiny spark of her magic in the unique gemstone that was giving the Key its name.

Instantly, there was a sensation of calm, serenity...and the painting vanished to her senses, being replaced by-

“A mirror?” Susan wondered, surprise filling her voice.

“No, not a mirror,” Alexandra chuckled, “a secret passage.”

The Champion of Death verified it by trying to plunge her arm into the ‘mirror’...and where a normal mirror would have stopped quite quickly her attempt, her arm disappeared from view immediately.

“When they spoke of secret passages, I didn’t imagine that.” Susan cleared her throat. “This is dangerous, Alex. You don’t know where it leads.”

“Not for certain, but I have a good idea. The painting was not chosen by coincidence, my dear Hufflepuff.”

“You’re not serious.”

Silence, in some situations, was really the best answer.

“You’re serious.”

“I need answers.”

“You will face pretty much the entire Doge Court, alone and unsupported, if you try that.”

“I doubt it.” Given the frustrated expression of the red-haired Badger, Alexandra explained fast. “No matter how many Potions he has at its disposal to keep his Guards alert, Malatesti has to guard Ca’Bellicosa, since Delacour is there. At least a third of his effectives will be stuck in his ancestral home. Moreover, the place I am about to visit isn’t a hotel or some kind of palace, despite the name. And the ‘Dark Doge’ can give all the orders he wants, nobody is going to want to spend dozens of hours in empty and cold rooms waiting for an attack that might never come.”

“This is still extremely dangerous, Alex.”

“Which is why I’m using a secret passage.” The Potter Heiress shrugged.

“And if the Exchequer gave him the location of those? If they are waiting at the other end of the passage?”

“Then this Task is a joke and it is better for us to surrender all at once, pride be damned.” Alexandra replied bluntly. “I don’t like losing, but my pride is not worth our lives. Better to stop the masquerade here and now before it unravels into something we will all regret.”

If the Exchequer had really given that much information to Malatesti and Poliakov, then there was no point participating in this Task at all. The downfall of the Light would happen, whether the Night Court played its role or not.

“This isn’t going to take one hour...and depending on who is present, I will be back within minutes. I just want you to play sentinel here until my return, so that the secret passage is magically active.”

“That I can do...at least as long as no one of the Day or the Doge Courts enter the Galleria. Be careful, Alexandra.”

The green-eyed witch answered with a light kiss.

“Always.”

The Champion of the Morrigan stepped forwards the entrance of the secret passage, and in a second, she wasn’t in the Galleria dell’ Academia any longer.

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

“BOMBARDA!”

“REDUCTO!”

“NOCTIS REPELLO!”

Cedric cast as many offensive spells as he could in a few seconds, and by his side, the rest of the Day Court did the same.

Giovanni Ruspoli cast powerful fire spells, Henri de Condé summoned hundreds of swords made of pure light, just to name but a few examples.

The enemy was annihilated. They had breached the gates, but the defences waiting behind it had slowed them down enough for the Champions, Warlocks, Artificers, and Guards to arrive in time.

And as the entrance of Ca’Luce was enough to only allow for four or five men to pass at the same time, it was a slaughter.

There was only one problem. This was neither men nor a various magical creatures that they killed in great numbers.

“What in the name of Merlin are those things?” The Hufflepuff Champion asked as Gauthier and Montague were making sure Ruspoli’s magical fires didn’t spread out of control.

The lifeless things were pale, as they had been deprived of sunlight for too long, but Cedric had been attentive enough in class to know they weren’t Inferi.

To begin with, Inferi were human corpses before a mage animated them by fell sorcery. These things...had never been human. Their hands were more akin to paws, ending with curved claws. The shapes of the legs and arms were also wrong. The heads...the eyes...they looked like someone had combined animal and human things, and arrived at a grotesque final result.

“Homunculi,” Henri de Condé answered, “creatures born of Dark Alchemy’s artifices. I have never seen those, but the signs are rather easy to find out now that I can examine one. Black blood, irisless eyes, no souls. The perfect wand-fodder if you have a crude understanding of Dark Alchemy and enough reagents.”

“They aren’t made from human corpses?” The relief was evident in Montague’s voice.

“No,” the Beauxbatons Champion shook his head. “In fact, using human bodies, whether dead or alive, is rather wasteful for those abominations. And-“

“More are coming!”

Giovanni Ruspoli cursed profusely in Italian. Cedric was almost glad his understanding of the language was imperfect.

“This was only the first wave!”

“They are going to try to-“

“BOMBARDMA MAXIMA! REDUCTO!”

“FIERA INCENDIA MAXIMA!”

“STOP THAT RUSPOLI! DO YOU WANT TO MAKE US BURN?”

“DIFFINDO VENTUS!”

It was like a dark tide nothing could stop. Deep inside, Cedric was trying to reason that his imagination was playing tricks upon him; the entrance was too small, especially with the ruins of Ca’Luce gate partially hindering the Homunculi – the corpses of the first wave were aggravating the problem of the attackers.

But there were really, really many Homunculi of the Dark. Hundreds had already been slaughtered, but more were already coming.

“Condé!” One of the Beauxbatons Guards shouted. “How do we kill these things in great numbers? Light magic is killing them too slowly!”

“They must have been created specifically to hunt Light wizards!” The French pureblood snapped back while continuing to throw spells which decimated the Homunculi coming. “We need a Solar ritual!”

“ARE YOU MAD?”

“You prefer waiting for the sun to rise? It’s only seven or eight hours away, I think!”

“**ORDER**.”

It was like a unique note of music resonated everywhere at once.

Cedric felt as if someone had trapped his fingers into something painful, and he wasn’t the only one. Montague fell to his knees and shrieked like they were torturing him.

But for the Homunculi, the effect was way worse.

In mere seconds, it looked like the entire invasion was...liquefying.

Yes, it was really describing accurately what was happening.

The bodies of the Haemonculi, where they were ‘alive’ or ‘dead’, were turning into liquid.

*They are turning back into the Alchemical reagents they were made of*.

Cedric couldn’t explain how the thought arrived in his head, but he knew that was true the moment he was able to think clearly...which was when the music stopped.

The Homunculi assault waves had stopped.

There were no more attackers coming through the ruined gates, from the cold, dark night waiting outside.

But his eyes, much like the rest of the Day Court, were not looking in that direction.

Cedric was watching the long procession of white-robed wizards and witches advancing.

They were many and powerful...and though a few were coming bare-headed, most were masked.

The man – assuming he was really a man – leading them was known to all, now.

The light was so powerful around him Cedric felt his legs shake and his body cover in sweat.

By his right stood Neville Longbottom, and the expression of utter glee on his face...Cedric knew the ‘Day King’ was fully in his thrall.

But this could wait. In the hands of the ‘Archmage’, there was an object shining like a sun, and Cedric only needed a glance to know that it was the artefact which had destroyed in one attack all the Haemunculi.

“**The Dark ends tonight**.” The words struck like an order...because it was one. “**It is the will of the Light that the Seals mustn’t be activated. This pathetic game the Great Enemy is playing has no reason to be played anymore. The Grail will lead you to victory. Before dawn, all servants of the Dark must have been killed. Spare Eleonora da Riva and Fleur Delacour, and bring them to me. Kill all the others. The Night and the Doge Courts will be extinct when the sun will rise again. This is the will of the Light**.”

“No!”

**16 February 1995, Ducal Palace, San Marco District, Venice**

“Now that was unpleasant,” Alexandra whispered as she exited the secret passage.

When the role of the Emerald Keys had been revealed, the Ravenclaw Champion had imagined the key would open centuries-old tunnels that had been magically created to exist despite the lagoon’s existence.

She had seriously not imagined the Exchequer would create something between different realities. The secret passage had given her vibes of Pandemonium, except this small crossing was not imbued with the power of Death...and thus far riskier to spend a lot of time into.

Alexandra had spent only a few seconds in it, and yet it felt like the cold of this freezing corridor had tried to suck everything warm and positive in her.

“And to say I will have to use it once more to leave...” the green-eyed witch sighed. “Not something to look forwards to, even if it did the job.”

Because the furniture around her was familiar, having visited this museum before. The secret passage had indeed led her inside the Ducal Palace of Venice, and there was no welcoming committee.

She had promised Susan it wouldn’t take long, thus in the next seconds, Alexandra began to rush towards the famous cells while trying to keep the sounds of her footsteps as low as possible.

Something that was quite unnecessary, the Potter Heiress discovered a few seconds later, for the two Guards of the Doge Court guarding the last door were too busy exchanging their point of view on the ‘sea jousting race’ and some other pieces of gossip.

“All I’m saying, Massimo, is that Malatesti wouldn’t say no if Delacour said yes. He was quite busy impressing her when he tried to push Falk into the Grand Canal.”

“But she won’t say yes. I’m ready to bet one hundred Tournament Ducats.”

“You don’t have one hundred Tournament Ducats, Massimo. And they will be useless once the Task is over.”

“You don’t know what is about to happen. We might capture the Night Queen tonight, and Malatesti will reward us-“

“No, you won’t. Stupefy. Stupefy.”

Alexandra had not expected much resistance, but that her two Stunning Charms struck the Guards disguised as two modern – and very blue – Legionnaires was quite frankly disappointing.

“Too easy.”

And since it was too easy, it was most likely a trap.

“Nothing to do but continue...but first, I must take care of those two idiots.”

By the rules of the Tournament she could have killed them without repercussions. That said, these two students seemed more the kind of useful morons Malatesti wanted for his team. They likely knew nothing, and were in it for the excitement. If stupidity was a crime, they would be as guilty as Crabbe and Goyle...but if Alexandra began to kill everyone who was an idiot, most of her life would be spent murdering nine out of ten people she met every day.

After a minute of searching, Alexandra threw the two Guards in an abandoned room that had collected dust, and they were properly gagged and bound to make sure they wouldn’t raise the alarm too soon, even if her Stunning Charms failed.

The Champion of House Ravenclaw didn’t know if she had to be worried or relieved that there was no one coming while she did handle her prisoners. It had to be...a bit of both. Avoiding a large scale battle was the priority, but any semi-competent Court King would have planned for regular – or irregular – patrols.

“Let’s go visit the cells...”

The prison section of the Ducal Palace was as cold as in her memories. It was very medieval. The walls were cold and akin to a dungeon, with only a few candles to provide light.

There were new enchantments that had not been there before, but quite clearly, they were not here to change the temperature.

If Alexandra had any doubt about it, the sight of Ronald Weasley trying to keep himself warm by doing some exercise would have erased it. And someone from the Doge Court had given him warm clothes over his prisoner’s costume.

Since she wasn’t invisible, the red-haired Gryffindor didn’t take long to notice her presence.

“Potter?”

“Weasley.”

“That’s the Night Queen! She is here to kill us!”

Oh great, none of the other prisoners were sleeping, courtesy of the cold. Alexandra was really beginning to hate Malatesti.

“Go back under your coats, oh purified gondoliers of the Day Court. I have not come to kill you.” Alexandra rolled her eyes. “I would have already begun the slaughter if it was the case.”

“Why are you here, then?” The brother of Fred and George asked. The female Champion opened her mouth to answer-

“**ORDER**.”

There was a scream.

Something akin to a cacophony assaulted her senses...an enormous attack of Light magic.

Alexandra winced and tried to cast wordlessly a shield...which did not achieve anything but increasing the pain assaulting her.

And then the iron bars of each cell exploded, the War glyphs Malatesti had used to keep the Day Court imprisoned overwhelmed by the Light onslaught.

“WE ARE FREE! KILL HER!”

The corridor was too narrow. The Light was seemingly boosting the strength of the Day Court’s members.

Alexandra made her choice.

The rapier she carried tonight was drawn, and her first strike took Francesco Pepoli straight in the eye. With her second, the enchanted metal found his throat.

Ulrich Fuchs was the next to try to kill her, his wands burning with Light magic.

“SECARE!”

Alexandra channelled lightning and struck again. Soon enough, the smell of roasted meat was everywhere, to accompany the severed arms.

Yaroslav Leskov, she killed next. His shield was imperfect; it covered only the upper part of his body. So she stabbed his legs. When he fell, the shield collapsed and Death took him in her embrace.

Maksim Gribov tried to curse her with something nasty involving acid and a solar ray. For this, she carved apart his chest before setting him on fire.

As Ron Weasley had stayed in his cell, there was only Falk left.

The Champion of Wisdom has tried to transform into his Animagus...except, naturally, the cells were way too small for any large-sized animal to move in such narrow passages.

Alexandra was frankly amused that Falk’s Animagus form appeared to be a sort of large stag...

“Eikthyrnir,” she found the name after a few seconds, while Falk’s antlers were desperately trying to free themselves from the trap the cell had revealed itself to be. “The stag which stands upon Valhalla.”

“Congratulations, dark spawn! You know Norse mythology!”

Alexandra tried to keep a bored expression.

“Where I am coming from, it is considered rather intelligent to not insult someone with a sword and a wand pointed at you.”

The antlers began to vanish, and everything around Frode Falk began to be soaked into Light magic, with the surface of the gold beginning to take gold and bronze colours.

It was well...kind of moronic. The lackey of Ra was trying to push everything he had in a single self-destructive attack to take her with him in death...

“You have come to kill me. Savour this moment, foul spawn. You won’t know any other.”

Seriously, did he think her so stupid to not notice the signs of this suicide curse?

“I have come for the Key, Falk. Not to kill you. For that, you can thank your Lord Archmage, or whatever you call it when you grovel at his feet.”

“LIES! DOMINUS LUX!”

“Fulmen Aegis.”

The explosion of light was...spectacular.

Alexandra had to give the moron that.

More or less everything that wasn’t protected by her shield was...twisted and melted.

But for all its shrieking, Falk couldn’t resist when she claimed his soul and send it to the Morrigan waiting behind the Veil.

“The Light is really becoming incredibly weak.” Obviously she had not been so stupid as to utter a spell relying on the Dark for protection, but the suicide curse of Falk had not done much damage. His cell and the nearby corridor was ruined...and there were a lot of fissures that hadn’t been here before...time to go.

Alexandra cast an Accio and a Tournament Key arrived in her hand...and of course it was not an Aquamarine, but another Emerald Key.

“Someone should really tell Malatesti his sense of humour is awful.” The Potter Heiress shook her head. “At least the night hasn’t been a complete waste.”

Unless Malatesti hid behind his brutish tactics a mind of peerless tactician, the Champion of Ares had not anticipated something like that to happen. His two Guards would have been as much taken by surprise if Falk and his lieutenants had escaped from their cell as she did when she stunned them minutes ago.

“Are they dead?”

Alexandra blinked in surprise as she went next to the last cell...which alone of the whole prison now, had still a living prisoner.

“I would have expected you to run, Weasley.”

“I am...I am not fast enough to escape you if you decide to hunt me...Potter.”

The fear of the Gryffindor was really obvious.

“That’s true, I suppose.” Alexandra stared at him. “And to answer your question, yes, they are dead. They thought that trying to attack me while surprise was in their favour would work. They were wrong.”

Something that her rapier, covered in the blood of those who had pledged themselves to Ra, insisted it in a clear and vivid manner.

“They have been...they changed. Neville was worse, but...but every time they did go to these ceremonies, they were returning...they were not the same as before.”

“Interesting,” Alexandra commented. “But you weren’t invited?”

“No,” and the shiver of horror was not faked in the slightest, “they did want me to, but...I had something from my mom, something about detentions, I forged her signature and lied a lot, and...I didn’t go to...I didn’t go there.”

And thus Ronald Weasley, low-ranked student, had tricked the Archmage of the Light and avoided the brainwashing far more powerful wizards had been unable to avoid.

The irony was really delicious.

“If the situation wasn’t so grave, I think your brothers would already be busy congratulating yourself for the prank, Ronald Weasley.”

“Err...thanks?”

Alexandra sighed, cleaned her rapier magically, and then used her Hydra strength to open in full the cell...unlike the others, this one had received only minor enchantments.

“Follow me, Weasley. You can’t stay here.”

“The Doge Court...they won’t kill me?”

“Malatesti won’t kill you, he will likely parade you as a prisoner and throw you tomatoes.” The Champion of Death conceded. “But I can’t promise you that Ra will spare you, if he comes here to see why his Champion failed to escape his cell.”

Her impression of the King of the Exchequer was that he was not the kind of monster who executed a messenger when he received bad news. But Alexandra wouldn’t swear the same applied to the Archmage.

“Oh...oh right.” The Gryffindor boy said weakly. “You will...lead me to Fred and George?”

“More likely I will lead you to a hotel room where you will be able to clean up and get a respectable costume...your brothers are very busy, and I won’t lead you to their ‘secret lair’ when you are part of the enemy Court. Now please, hurry up, I am quite late, and the disappearance of the Guards is going to be noticed.”

Alexandra began to run in the stairs, cursing under her breath as the former prisoner revealed himself incredibly slow to her taste.

Alas, there was nothing she could do to change that...except killing him in cold blood, but the Ravenclaw Champion doubted Fred and George would thank her for the deed.

They left the cells of the Ducal Palace behind them...only for the candles to disappear and be replaced by hundreds of torches.

And the reason why these torches were lit was that they were over a dozen Doge Guards running as fast as they could in their direction...though they immediately stopped the moment they saw her.

As half of them had no masks at this hour, Alexandra had no problem to see their stupefaction.

Falk’s suicide must have triggered some alarms, unless it was the Grail’s destruction of the cell enchantments...but it had not told them anything about who was there.

“War. I know you are here, Dark Doge.”

There was the sound of hand clapping...and then Romeo Malatesti appeared left the cover provided by his troops to face her.

“I had not planned for such an eventful night,” the Dark Champion of Ares began melodramatically. “The Night Queen visiting my humble palace-“

“Shut up.” The green-eyed witch snapped. “By not killing immediately Falk and his ilk, you gave them a chance to escape. I had to deal with them when the Grail’s power destroyed your enchantments.”

“Oh? Ah well, it is...an inconvenience,” Romeo Malatesti stopped smiling. “But still, you seems to have things well in hand-“

“Nothing is proceeding ‘well’, War!” The Ravenclaw Champion wondered what sort of poison had been poured into the milk of this Champion at birth. “The Archmage has just used the Grail and intervened directly in the Task! Do you understand what it means?”

“The situation is serious,” the Dark Doge admitted out loud, but surely he isn’t going to try to activate a second one...he would break all the rules...”

“**INNOCENCE**.”

It was like a gigantic weight fell upon their shoulders.

In one second, Ron Weasley and all the Legionnaires of the Doge Court collapsed...and two more seconds later, they all loudly began to snore.

“You were saying?”

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

“No!”

Henri de Condé wished he had said the words. But with the presence of Ra nearby, he was fundamentally unable to.

It was already difficult to keep some fragment of his sanity...saying ‘no’ would require more fortitude than he ever had.

The Champion of Horus remained silent...and dearly hoped his fears weren’t about to be realised.

“No?” The simple word might have resonated in a neutral tone...but Henri knew that it was not. The Archmage was positively furious someone had interrupted him.

That the ‘someone’ was a ‘mere’ Champion of the Day Court was making things worse.

“No,” Lucas Gauthier repeated, and at this moment, Henri de Condé was incredibly proud to be a student of Beauxbatons. “Killing is authorised, yes, but this isn’t the Night Court which came to attack your ridiculously decorated palace. No doubt this is one of the feuds you have with the Dark that is responsible for this situation. This is the European Magical Tournament, hypocrite. We are students who participate in it. We aren’t your slaves. I am going to pack my affairs, and leave this ‘Ca’Luce’ forever. By morning, I will inform the Judges of the many violations you were responsible for tonight and in the days before. Since you’re a Hogwarts teacher, I think the Judges will be very interested listening to my testimony. Goodbye.”

Lucas was brave, and as he began to climb the stairs leading to the floors over their heads, Henri respected his courage.

What had been said was completely true...and it was absolutely the wrong strategy. His fellow Beauxbatons Champion should have run into the night...

“**I suppose there is no hope to make you change your mind**?”

“If you think I am going to let you Imperius me like you did the others, you can take your staff and ram it where-“

“**I thought not. NEFER**.”

Lucas Gauthier’s disappeared in a pyre of white flames, and his screams immediately resonated, agony and musical cacophony merged in an awful act of magical murder.

No one moved. It was way too late...and moving meant exposing oneself to the same attack.

Henri knew a colossal mistake when he saw one. Before, the Day Court had been angry and frustrated.

Now they *loathed* Ra and the Day King who was smiling by his side.

They were deathly afraid, yes. But they hated the one who had just killed Lucas.

The white flames disappeared. The screams ended. There was nothing bigger than some ashes to testify Lucas had existed in the first place.

“FIRE! FIRE! IT HURTS!”

Henri turned his head...right in time to see seven Knights of the Army of Light explode in the same pyres of white light that had consumed a Champion of the Tournament.

The screams resumed, but more powerful, and this time discipline broke.

The ground shook.

There was an immense roar, and the walls shook in turn.

And in the distance, the Champion of Horus could see...an immense pillar rising...and an enormous portal of fire illuminate the night.

“This is San Michele Island...” he heard Ruspoli mutter on his left. “But what is that thing?”

“A Summon,” the Grail was supposed to kill certain emotions after they drank from it, but Henri realised it was a lie; he really could feel the terror he would feel in ‘normal’ circumstances. “It has to be a Summon. Most likely, it came in two stages. The first was triggered yesterday when Delacour burned Temen...and the second was now.”

And they were, pardon his language, completely fucked.

That they could see the Summon from here was already bad enough. San Michele was close from Venice, but not close enough they should be able to see somewhere on it with any sort of clarity, night or no night.

That the Summon was clearly visible...that they could see effortlessly this behemoth of flames...it was bad, really bad.

“Okay,” Graham Montague said weakly. “That’s...really, really bad.”

As if echoing his thoughts, many lines of magic began to appear north of Venice. No, not just north...everywhere...and Henri knew what they were immediately, as the pull of the Grail over his mind diminished.

The Exchequer was burning the bastions and sanctuaries of the Light across Venice, with the power of the Seal that had been activated during the gondola race.

The first onslaught of the Grail had forced the Avatar of Darkness to reveal his hand.

The final battle, that they expected to happen on the final day of the Carnival, was going to be fought here and now.

“**By the power that are bestowed to me by the Light Powers**,” the light shrouding the Grail tripled in radiance, “**let the innocent outside these halls sleep like the just they are, so that the warriors of the Light can usher the days of glory! INNOCENCE**.”

When the power slammed...it felt wrong. It felt forced. It felt unnatural.

And Henri knew for certain that the Power that had been used was utterly furious that the power committed to forge the Grail had been used in this fashion.

And with his eyes of Animagus, Henri watched the Grail...and sure enough, there was a slight fissure. It was nearly impossible to distinguish for human eyes...but his eyes could see it.

“**Go forwards, holy warriors of the Light**,” Ra ordered. “**Save the vilest Black Wizards and Witches, all are asleep now. Go forwards...and end the Dark forever**.”

**16 February 1995, Ducal Palace, San Marco District, Venice**

Naturally, the power which had forced Weasley and the Doge Legionnaires asleep had also done the same to Susan.

There was no other explanation why the painting hiding the secret passage had returned to its default appearance...and obviously, the other Emerald Key wasn’t working on it.

The Champion of the Morrigan sighed and walked back, before making a series of jumps that should have been impossible if she only relied upon her human strength.

Seconds later, Alexandra was on the roof of the Ducal Palace.

Malatesti was waiting for her.

For long seconds, none of them spoke.

The tragedy presented to their eyes was so powerful that comments were useless.

The Salamander Summon was here.

Weeks ago, Alexandra had remarked upon the difficulty of neutralising the Light-infected grounds of San Michele Island and its cemetery.

Clearly, the Exchequer must have agreed with their point of view, for the Salamander was busy incinerating everything here.

The island, the church, the graves, the Light artefacts...everything was going to be reduced to ashes. Everything was going to be razed to is foundations.

And it was just the beginning. The fire was spreading.

The redoubts and the bastions of the Light in the periphery of Venice...they were all set aflame, one by one.

This was obviously no normal conflagration. No fireworks had been prepared for these pyres.

And from the top of the Ducal Palace, Alexandra could see all too clearly what the purpose was.

It was carving an enormous pentacle of fire into reality, with the outer circle surrounding Venice.

This was the ritual ground for everything the Exchequer had planned for.

It was terrible and destructive.

It also was too soon.

While in the last minutes Alexandra had felt one or two Seals being activated, they were still far, far from the number of thirteen.

And at the risk of saying the obvious, she had a single Aquamarine Keys. Not thirteen. Just one.

“Orders misunderstood, Fate changing the game, or deliberate malice from someone among the Exchequer?” She asked Malatesti as the tumult of war began to be heard in the streets of Venice. The power of the Grail had neutralised the Doge and Night Courts, but it had not neutralised the Exchequer.

And now the forces of Osiris kept in reserve for the great battle were revealing themselves, attacking the Trinity and all the other Light organisations which had gone hunting in the streets of Venice.

“They think...it was a big misunderstanding,” the Champion of War said hesitantly, his usual arrogance nowhere to be seen. “To avoid disruptions, the suggestions had to be as vague as possible, go through several intermediaries, and so on. The Fire Seal was...not supposed to be activated so early. And to keep the Summon in a semi-controllable state, the Water Seal had to be active as fast as possible.”

It was somewhat logical...so Fleur Delacour making a barbecue of Urmah Temen had been a colossal mistake, and then Poliakov, by obeying the orders he was given, had made the matters worse.

Because Ra had suddenly understood there was no limit on the number of Seals the Exchequer could activate on a single day...and predictably, the Archmage had realised there was a fair chance he was about to lose.

Everything...what was happening was no longer part of the Exchequer’s plan.

Duels of magic and steel were beginning in the streets, and wizards and witches died shouting their defiance and their allegiance.

Blood was turning the canals into a crimson colour under the light of the enchanted torches.

It was a war of mages.

And if there was a victor, it would be the last one standing.

“What now...your Majesty?”

Alexandra grimaced. Suddenly, she really hated that title.

“The only way to stop this madness and return to something approaching the plan of the Fourth Task...” the Champion of the Morrigan by a monumental effort stopped closed her eyes and tried to ignore the fiery presence of the Salamander Summon, “the only way to do that is to kill Ra.”

Romeo Malatesti laughed...it was a sound calling for carnage and madness.

“Some at school think you’re the most reasonable of us...but you’re just as crazy, you just hide it better. Killing the Archmage of the Light. Nothing else?”

“If you want me to go looking for my friends so that I evacuate this city while I let you kill each other, please say so, War.”

The laughter of the Venetian Champion immediately stopped.

“Okay...you’ve made your point, Death. But...it’s Ra. They don’t call him the Archmage just to inflate his ego, you know.”

“I’m well aware,” Alexandra coldly answered. “But this is likely our last chance...and the best one we will ever have.” Not to mention that Alexandra wasn’t sure they could evacuate. This pentacle of fire that was materialising could certainly prevent them from Apparating away. “Delacour and Da Riva aren’t on his side. I just killed Falk. Temen died yesterday. He has only three Champions left, and the Salamander Summon is going to severely impact the amount of power he can draw upon.”

“As will the first Seal in several minutes,” Romeo Malatesti chose to reveal after a grimace. “Fine. But we still have no chance even if we combine our talents and power. We are both very powerful, but in experience alone, he is going to slaughter us.”

“Then we don’t fight him with two Champions. Provided they aren’t asleep, I can bring reinforcements. You can do the same.”

“This...you realise there’s no turning back?”

“You realise that Ra is coming to kill us?” Alexandra allowed herself a vicious grin. “I’m certainly at the top of his black list, because I have really annoyed him for months...but I think everyone who matters is to be hunted mercilessly by his will.”

“Now that you say it like that...I’m in. But it is going to take a significant amount of time...Potter.”

“Of course,” Alexandra nodded, watching the pillar of light illuminating Ca’Luce in the distance. “I’m going to cut down the number of Light Champions while you prepare.”

The Hydra Animagus teleported on the Plaza di San Marco below. Before anyone realised she was here, two of her lightning spells had decapitated three wizards of the Trinity.

Casting elemental spell after elemental spell, Alexandra started to run.

**16 February 1995, Campo San Polo, San Polo District, Venice**

Graham Montague had thought he had fought a war when he survived the Tasks of the Tournament.

He had been wrong.

He knew nothing.

What was happening in the streets of Venice in the middle of the night...that was war.

Masked or non-masked wizards and witches were killing each other in exchanges of spells almost too fast for his eyes.

It was just...it was crazy.

The torches had been the first to die out, and as a result the Slytherin Champion had collided with plenty of walls.

But there was no way Graham was going to cast a Lumos or an Incendio.

One Guard of their Court had tried it...the Hogwarts Champion thought it had been one of the Guards Ruspoli had recruited from the Scuola Regina.

The poor Venetian – assuming it was him – had received within four seconds half a dozen offensive spells, including at least one Killing Curse.

“Where do we go?” Cedric Diggory whispered to his ear.

“I don’t know!” Graham admitted, trying to keep his voice low despite his panic. “I’m just trying to get away from this madness! I haven’t signed for this!”

“If we are found by the white robes, they will-“

“They are going to kill us, Diggory.” If the Hufflepuff believed the contrary, it was best to say it in simple terms. “I read the rules. We have complete immunity. The moment he killed Gauthier, this bastard of Archmage made sure the ICW could seize pretty much his entire fortune and make him a wanted man, no matter where he hide. Since he doesn’t want that, he will try to kill us all. No witnesses, no problem...oh, shit...RUN!”

Graham rushed vaguely towards the streets next to the church...a church that was suddenly shrouded in flames. And if it wasn’t some cursed magical fire, Graham was ready to eat his school books.

“Dark magic!” The Slytherin Champion shouted. “We are going to need to find another exit and-“

There was an enormous blinding flash, and suddenly, the immediate sounds of battle vanished.

It was not good news.

Suddenly, Graham and every member of the Day Court that was with him could see as clear as in day light...and thus they had no problem identifying the one who was responsible for this.

“De Condé,” Angelina Johnson was the first to say his name, “thank Merlin, we thought-“

Cedric immediately stopped her, but Graham would have done the same thing.

There was something...something unnatural with the French Champion. Call it aura, call it magic...and when you looked at his emotionless face, the Slytherin Champion knew they had a big problem.

“Deserters won’t be tolerated.”

It was really a voice that didn’t seem human, and-

“**UNITY**.”

Graham flinched as the explosion of Light magic happened again...and all over the plaza, several mages in white robes which were still twitching began to...change.

“Let us go,” he pleaded, “we aren’t against your side; we just want to get out of this crazy battle.”

“Deserters won’t be tolerated,” having spoken with De Condé, the impression was that the French pureblood was already dead. Then his blue eyes stared at him. “The Dark must die.”

“You can fight this!” Cedric urged. “You can-“

“**Horus, oh master of the skies, you who dance with the wind, the reign of the falcons begins**-“

There was a silver flash...and Henri de Condé screamed.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Graham blinked...and suddenly Alexandra Potter was here, a rapier against the throat of De Condé. And the Champion of Horus was missing his right arm...an arm that had just fallen on the pavement with his magical wand.

The near-corpses which had begun to turn into Nephilim all fell across the plaza, decapitated.

“Black witches must be eliminated.”

“I would say ‘give me a reason to kill you’,” the Ravenclaw witch began, “but you are already dead, aren’t you?”

“Potter, it is not his fault-“

“Quiet, Diggory,” the light spell De Condé had cast was fading, and obscurity was returning...but the green eyes of the Ravenclaw were burning like terrible Killing Curses. “Ur. Raido. Teiwaz. Eihwaz. The journey begins by a choice, the double branch is opened, the flames dance around the ancestral tree! URTE!”

And in a bright explosion of green magic, the French pureblood disappeared...minus his arm and his wand.

The witch who was responsible for it made a sound of satisfaction while grabbing the wand.

“Good. One more Champion out of the game.”

“Are you mad?” Cormac McLaggen had remained silent in the last minutes, but this pleasure was evidently over. “Do you know what you have done?”

“I have removed an enemy from the board.” The way the Basilisk Slayer spoke seemed neutral...but Graham could bet there was some satisfaction underneath.

“The one who did...who transformed him into *that*...he will try to find him.” Angelina declared.

“No doubt. But he’s going to need time.” The leader of the Night Court bent the knee to grab the wand of the Champion she had just defeated.

“The Archmage will tear the information from your mind.”

“No, he won’t.” Alexandra Potter grinned. “I don’t know where I sent him.”

“What?”

“McLaggen, you better close your mouth, you are really looking like a moron right now.” The Champion of House Ravenclaw huffed. “And by the way, I poisoned my blades. Most likely, it won’t be enough to kill him, his Animagus form is most likely the Light Falcon...but he will be unconscious for days, maybe weeks.”

“He didn’t deserve that.” Cedric Diggory proclaimed. Graham had the urge to facepalm. Hufflepuffs...

“Let me remind you that if I hadn’t arrived in time, he would have killed you before dumping the bodies in the Venetian lagoon.” The green eyes turned towards him. “Montague. As sad as it is to say, you seem to be the sanest Champion here tonight.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Longbottom. He is by the Archmage’s side, is he not?”

“Yes, he is.” The Slytherin Champion hesitated, then decided he had nothing to lose. “Potter...I sold several secrets of Ca’Luce defences to Malatesti. I think he...I think he used this for his allies to bait the Death Eaters into attacking the heavily defended palace and provoking Ra. And at this hour...they must have captured the Dark Lord.”

“**UNITY**.”

“Fulmen Magna.”

All around the bloody Campo, Nephilim flew in and tried to attack them...and a second later, lightning brought all of them down, wingless and horribly burned.

“So the Grail Power of Unity can create Nephilim,” Potter commented as if it was no big deal. “Thanks for the information, Montague.”

The green-eyed witch who was certainly on her way to become one of the most dangerous Dark Ladies the world had ever seen sighed.

“Well, I suppose it’s time the Boy-Who-Lived and I have a little discussion about his poor choice of friends.”

“Black is with him. And he’s like him-“

“Oh, I doubt Black is with us anymore, Montague. Longbottom has been brainwashed, but given how useless he was during the Tournament, Ra certainly called for a more dangerous player inside the body he destined to be Unity Champion.”

“What...what are you saying?”

“She’s speaking of Possession, Diggory.” Graham coughed. “Am I right?”

“You are. Now, at the risk of commanding you, I have a mission that requires several Champion of at least reasonable competence, and you’re the only ones available.”

“And if we think it’s best to flee the city?”

“No one can flee the city without major Runic random translocation, that’s why I sent De Condé away like I did.”

Oh, great...

“We’re willing to listen to your mission, Night Queen.”

Hopefully, it would save him from a painful death...

**16 February 1995, Campiello del Piovan, Santa Croce District, Venice**

It was not difficult to find the Archmage of the Light and his lackeys.

They had turned the small plaza in front of an old church into a heavily warded sanctuary, and the sheer power of Light magic that burned had to be seen to be believed.

But even if Alexandra had not received that ‘help’, it would have been nearly impossible to get lost on their way to here.

There were a lot of wizards hammering at the wards. Many were not Exchequer mages. Most likely, they were mercenaries recruited for the occasion. Some others were clearly Death Eaters, trying to save their leader.

And there was an enormous pressure in the air that was absolutely not natural.

The Powers, Light and Dark, were watching.

*Fate* was watching.

By intervening as he did, Ra had more or less broken the Statute of Secrecy on his own.

The Potter Heiress was a bit curious to know how many delusions the ‘old fossil’ had embraced to convince himself this night was going to be without repercussions. While the Army of Light and the Exchequer had avoided destroying houses and thus killing the carnival participants inside, there was no way the fighting spiralling out of control could be hidden for long.

The Exchequer was not innocent of this situation either, as the large Salamander Summon trapping them in a pentacle of fire proved.

Alexandra didn’t know how it was going to end.

But the world wasn’t going to be the same in a dozen hours.

“**Bring me the prisoner**.”

Alexandra teleported on top of the campanile nearby. Apparition was only forbidden if you wanted to leave Venice, not moving within its own boundaries, and she had exploited that mercilessly in the last minutes.

And with her Hydra eyes, there was no problem watching everything happening below.

Like several white-robed mages dragging in chains the self-proclaimed Dark Lord Voldemort, also known as Tom Marvolo Riddle.

The Lord of the Death Eaters had received the beating of his life, certainly at the hands of Ra.

One of his legs had clearly been severed slightly under the knee, and his wand arm was no more. To make it even worse, Ra had burned some kind of brand upon the fresh wound, so that the stump would never have the possibility of regenerating. And of course it looked like some kind of enormous animal had clawed at his face, making sure one of his eyes would see nothing for the rest of his life.

Certain people at Hogwarts had whispered the last years that Voldemort looked like the hybrid of a snake and a man. These rumours had been evidently untrue; the appearance of the wizard was those of a thin, almost skeletal, black-haired man, but there was nothing serpentine about him.

Once again, mundane reality triumphed over wild rumours.

Alexandra had to stop herself from laughing as Ra began a loud speech how one prophecy had been accomplished, how Neville Longbottom was the Chosen One, blah, blah, blah...

In the mean time, she tested the wards...and once again, she had to stop herself from cackling.

Oh that was way too funny.

Ra feared so much Dark Magic that his wards were a shield against everything Dark, be it small or great.

Seriously, this was...idiotic in the extreme.

The ‘old fossil’ had been there at the beginning of the Tournament. He was there when she won the First Task.

Was his arrogance just that bad, or did he think Alexandra wasn’t going to intervene in this particular matter?

“One more time, then.”

From her pockets, Alexandra drew from her pockets her last creation: small ossicles of bones.

The bones had been provided by Susan, who hopefully would be protected by Angelina Johnson for the next hours.

But the Runes and the enchantments on the ossicles? The long preparation to shape them and imbue them with her elemental affinity? That was all hers.

It was too bad that she had only one hundred of them ready, but she had not expected things to transform into a bloodbath so quickly.

She had not expected to hear so many screams of agony tonight.

But she had enough ossicles for a few good attacks.

Alexandra launched ten ossicles into the air.

“Perthro, Haglaz, Eihwaz, Thurisaz, I call forth the thunder of heavens, Perthro, Haglaz, Eihwaz, Thurisaz, I call forth the thunder of the hells, Raido guides my magic, Thurisaz, I call forth the thunder of past wars! FULMEN IMPERATOR AETERNUM!”

The attack was simply magnificent...and with the ossicles she used, barely cost her a tenth of what a Fulmen Imperator would have.

It was incredibly cheap, for this was no ‘normal’ lightning battle-spell.

A white bolt descended from the sky, and it ripped apart in a single second the wards.

Over thirty mages of the Army of Light who had tied their magic to them screamed in surprise before being consumed by lightning.

The second bolt struck the other mages which had assembled around their illustrious prisoner. It was red, the very colour of blood, and in an instant, the wards and shields collapsed there too. More Light wizards died screaming.

The third bolt struck so quickly Ra had not yet reacted to the first bolt.

The lightning was the colour of Death, it was very much the same shade of green she saw every morning when looking at her eyes in a mirror.

Lightning devastated everything, and one soul was claimed in the inferno of thunder Alexandra had unleashed.

The young witch felt it.

All around her, it was like a gigantic mechanism had shattered.

It was like an hourglass containing this very city was shattered.

It was like the Powers...the Powers were laughing or shrieking, and magic went out of control.

Ra cast an enormous complicated Light spell in the seconds after, of course.

But it was too late.

There was nothing left of Tom Marvolo Riddle, better known in the British Isles as the Dark Lord Voldemort.

His soul belonged to Death...where a very unpleasant fate awaited him.

But he would not be the only one to die tonight. For if Longbottom had survived without a scratch, and the same was true of Ra...well, the ranks of the Army of Light had been annihilated. There had been more than sixty mages here, they would be very lucky if ten breathed in a few minutes. The Grail’s power was extraordinary, but given how much she had roasted them...

“**YOU**!” Ra, of course, had already noticed her on the roof of the Campanile. To be sure, her powerless ossicles had fallen on the pavement below...it was not exactly discreet.

“Me,” Alexandra giggled, because the fury on Ra’s face was really something to marvel at. “How does it feel, oh Archmage, to fail far away from the finish line? How does it feel to control Fate...*when Fate has no longer a Champion*?”

“**You will beg for your Power to end your miserable existence when I have finished with you**.” The Archmage swore as his aura became a monstrous thing of Light. “**And you have only won a reprieve, foolish tool of the Morrigan. The role this black mage had so readily volunteered for, it has been transferred to you. If you are sacrificed in his stead, the Chosen One’s power will be restored and amplified, so powerful the ruin of the Dark will be complete!”**

Alexandra yawned in exaggerating fashion.

“Yes, yes...but I see a little problem with that...you have to catch me first. Because dying on your ridiculous altar isn’t something I plan to do in one hundred years.”

A roar resonated, and Alexandra grimaced. The Boy-Who-Lived wasn’t a Light Champion anymore...but he had evidently kept his Animagus form and the mastery of it the Grail had granted him.

Yes, it was unfair.

And the Animagus form...Alexandra recognised it immediately, of course.

As her Animagus form was the Lernaean Hydra, how could she not recognise the enormous mane, the terrible fangs, and the pelt one of the most famous heroes of the Greek Antiquity had worn during his adventures?

The legend, unfortunately, had not exaggerated a lot.

The Nemean Lion was truly a very dangerous creature.

“**Kill her! Claim your rightful destiny, Chosen One**!”

“Well...that’s inconvenient,” Alexandra noted as in one jump, the Nemean Lion had already reached the top of the houses surrounding the campanile. “I am needed elsewhere! Ciao, overgrown cat!”

**16 February 1995, across the Santa Croce District, Venice**

He was hunting his prey.

It was his sole and only goal now.

Nothing else mattered.

He had to kill her.

The order had been given.

Failure was not an option.

The Nemean Lion roared and kill all the interlopers who tried to get between him and his prey.

They were weak and died easily.

But the prey had used the opportunity to win a few heartbeats of reprieve.

Fortunately, the Nemean Lion could smell her.

The prey reeked of an atrocious smell of snakes that infuriated him.

All Nemean Lions instinctively hated snakes.

It was going to be a pleasure tearing apart this prey.

He jumped.

He hunted.

Once more time, a group of fools got in the way.

Their spells, of course, were useless.

Their blades broke against his skin.

For their presumption, he tore them apart.

And the hunt continued.

Sometimes he was forced to go on two legs again, for the prey led him to narrow passages were no Nemean Lion could fit.

But this didn’t last.

The streets grew large enough again.

The prey was running faster, some of its clothes disappearing as if convinced this could give her enough speed to keep him at bay.

It didn’t. The street was large and long enough to use his true speed, and the hunt was almost over.

There was nothing but the Grand Canal and the prey was-

The Nemean Lion roared in anger as the prey jumped into the canal.

Cowardice.

Shameful cowardice.

The prey had proved it wouldn’t turn to face him and meet its end proudly.

For this the prey would die.

He was a Nemean Lion.

If the prey thought he couldn’t swim, it was going to be a pleasure to disabuse her of that notion.

The waters were undoubtedly cold tonight...but he was the Nemean Lion, and victory was his.

He jumped.

The contact with the water was indeed incredibly cold.

But the Nemean Lion was focused on his hunt.

Where was the prey? There was this dark form...

He began to swim instinctively...and suddenly, nine snake heads exploded out of the Grand Canal.

The Nemean Lion roared in fear, suddenly realising the trap he had fallen into.

**16 February 1995, the Grand Canal, Venice**

When this night would be over, Alexandra would go on to the sacred sites of the Morrigan and recite dozens of prayers.

Competent enemies always made things very complicated...so she could only be very thankful to the Power of Death. She was very lucky and blessed that the Gryffindors were so stupid.

After the First Task, it was likely no sane wizard or witch would be stupid enough to try to fight her in a watery environment – obviously, Lyudmila Romanov didn’t count.

Longbottom had jumped in the Grand Canal without hesitation.

To be fair to him, Nemean Lions were good swimmers.

It was still stupid.

And it was going to be his death.

One of her heads was busy tearing him apart, while the others were delivering lightning and poison attacks.

A Nemean Lion was incredibly tough, yes.

But Hercules had killed one before, so they clearly weren’t invincible.

It still was difficult.

Her second head managed at least to bite deep and sever one of the rear legs, but despite injecting enough poison to kill ten elephants, the Nemean Lion was still struggling and fighting back.

It was not exactly dangerous, as its claws were incapable of doing more than tickling the joints of her scales, but it was an annoyance.

Damn it, what was it going to take for him to die?

Alexandra didn’t like butchery, but there was no choice...enough time had already been wasted.

Three of her heads breathed lightning at once, and the intensity of the poison went beyond any venom and poison existing in Venice or in Europe in general. Maybe the Basilisks could have challenged her in that regard...but the Basilisks were dead.

The Lernaean Hydra’s annoyance rose, and as the poisons failed to finish her opponent, renewed the nine-fold assaults.

If the Nemean Lion couldn’t be killed in one blow...then she was going to tear him apart bite by bite.

Snakes could be very pragmatic hunters, and the Lernaean Hydra was at the apex of the serpent hierarchy.

“LUMEN OMEGA!”

The night was banished.

Pain exploded.

Suddenly, instead of nine pair of eyes to see, she had only eight.

Of course, she was already beginning to regenerate but-

Ra.

Damn it, the Archmage had arrived far faster than she had estimated.

Alexandra had no choice but to transform back...something that allowed her to evade a second battle-spell that would have destroyed one of her heads instantly.

The Ravenclaw Champion jumped out of the Grand Canal, placing the water avenue between her and the Lord of the Light.

“That was unpleasant,” she admitted, “but I think you are going to need a new Champion of Fate.”

The Nemean Lion was floating unconscious...well, what was left of the Gryffindor Animagus was floating half-dead.

It seemed that she had been incredibly close to kill him...at the very least, its regeneration and other magical capabilities were no longer active. Two out of four legs ripped out, over three hundred distinct lacerations, both eyes clawed out, the Lion’s blood had received so much poison it was turning black...

“**Don’t underestimate the power of the Grail**.”

“I’m not underestimating it, Archmage. I’m just confident enough that nothing but the Power of the Grail is going to be enough to save him.”

Even if all the best Healers of the Magical World were summoned here in this very minute, they wouldn’t be able to do anything...and that assumed they had the lore to know how to treat a Nemean Lion. Which was improbable, to say the least.

“You have to choose between hunting me and saving him. That should give me a few hours of advance, at the very least. Ciao!”

Ra predictably tried to blast her with a phenomenal Light battle-spell.

But Alexandra evaded it, and began to run away from this battlefield.

**16 February 1995, Ponte di Scalzi, Venice**

He was the Bishop Swashbuckler, and he was going to die.

The moment the battle had started, he had been certain of that.

Unfortunately, if he failed, it would mean everyone he held dear would die.

More accurately, every magical creature, be they human or not, having a tiny shred of Dark potential would die.

This was the worst-case scenario...but this one the King had clearly anticipated.

Bishop Swashbuckler wasn’t going to complain.

Having seen what the young Champion of Death had been able to accomplish, opening his mouth to complain would be absolutely childish.

The young generation of Dark Champions was fighting and paying the price tonight. No member of the Exchequer had a right to complain.

The brown-haired wizard uttered a prayer to Hades, and discarded his black robes.

Then he drank the vial that he had really hoped he would be able to give back to his master.

The taste was horrible; it was as if several old rats had been mixed with excrements.

But when magic began to spread in his veins...the taste was forgotten.

Power answered his call.

Bishop Swashbuckler cleared his throat...and attacked.

The three first blades rose from under the pavements, bigger than any spear wielded had any right to be.

The calculations and the mastery of the spell had been long and difficult.

In a couple of seconds, Swashbuckler managed to impale thirty-five times the last two Champions of the Light.

The one empowered by Unity may be able to survive, as he had not yet fought so far and was the closest to the Grail.

The Champion of Fate would not.

The Hydra had turned him into a roasted piece of meat, and Swashbuckler aggravated the damage, stopping immediately the cocoon of light Ra had erected to heal him.

Still, the Exchequer mage didn’t stop. His instructions had been quite clear.

“Fields of Punishment!” He snarled, conjuring an enormous firestorm that would have exhausted him if not for the Potion he had drunk before. “Summon the inferno, remember the ashes of Pompeii, burn the lies away, stoke the forges of Vulcan! IGNIS MAGNUS!”

The flames obeyed his incantation. Before the words left his lips, Swashbuckler knew he had less than one minute left before what he had ingested destroyed him.

The destructive onslaught raced ahead, and slammed into the shields of the Archmage. The Dark Wizard poured everything he had...and the shields flickered.

Fire engulfed the Champions.

Swashbuckler shouted with everything he had in his lungs.

And everything exploded.

“**FATE**!”

The Bishop of the Exchequer did not see anything before his arms turned into ashes.

The next blow was much like a storm, and it threw him from the bridge like he was an insignificant leave.

Swashbuckler didn’t know if it was a blessing or a curse he didn’t fall into the Grand Canal. The impact was extremely painful...and as his body began to burn, his thoughts strongly went in favour of the curse.

“The seventh power of the Grail...the power of Ineluctable Victory...the power of Fate...what...a terrible power...”

“**You failed**,” the monster replied.

“On the contrary...” Swashbuckler laughed, for all the flames began to reduce him to nothing. “I have given Death a chance to claim you. For an entire day...you are vulnerable.”

“**You are placing all your prayers on a fool’s errand. I am going to kill her, and then all your hopes will die with this pathetic imitation of Mordred. My Champions live. The Light will triumph**.”

“This is the end of folly-“

His killer struck, and Bishop Swashbuckler died smiling.

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

Alexandra had hoped she would get something like three hours to prepare the battlefield.

Since this was blood chaos everywhere and her hopes for tonight had endured disaster after disaster, the Potter Heiress would have thought twenty minutes a very satisfying proposition.

Of course, the Archmage didn’t give her that long.

Seven minutes.

Seven bloody minutes.

Seriously, what was necessary to slow down Ra?

Alexandra had felt a wizard of the Exchequer engage him as he ran away...and the fight had ended as abruptly as it began.

And so she waited.

The Plaza di San Marco was utterly silent now. The corpses of the Light wizards were everywhere.

Some of them she had splattered against the Campanile Tower of San Marco herself, while many others had died in the various battles that had raged in the last hours.

The battle was far from over.

In the distance, it was easy to hear weapons clashing and devastating spells being cast.

Alexandra waited. The Basilica of San Marco was right behind her.

It was kind of strange to see the greatest plaza of Venice so cold, so empty, after using the crowd to hide her presence on the first day of the Fourth Task.

It seemed an eternity ago.

All plans had come crashing down.

The Carnival to gather the thirteen Aquamarine Keys was no longer something to think deeply over.

Just as Alexandra let her Changelina have her rapier, they arrived.

A stupendous portal of Light opened, and a dozen figures stepped through.

The pressure of Light magic rose to an incredible degree, and though there was no one to her if it was true or not, the Potter Heiress guessed those were the last reserves her enemy could count upon. All the others were fighting for their lives against the Exchequer, or trying to stop the Salamander from incinerating their headquarters. The latter may not have been very successful, since there had been flames rising over Ca’Luce last time she checked three minutes ago.

“Archmage Ra, what a coincidence to meet you again,” Alexandra began sarcastically.

“**Those who raised you as a child**,” the Avatar of the Light’s voice was so close to a snarl it made her smile, “**did a very bad job curbing down your insolence**.”

“Agreed.” Alexandra remained silent for a few seconds.

There were twelve potential opponents. For now, Neville Longbottom remained the least dangerous, as he was cloaked into a sort of ‘light cocoon’ and levitated by several wizards. Now that there was no mask and no robes, she could really see how much he had changed. This was indeed no fourteen-year-old boy, but a young adult of seventeen-eighteen...a young adult who was going to be disfigured and covered in scars for the rest of his life. Interestingly, while the Grail seemed to be able to erase the majority of the injuries, a lot of them weren’t vanishing. Several of the esoteric poisons she had assimilated had done a fantastic job.

The nine other mages seemed to be regular wizards. They weren’t to be ignored, but those she had killed a while ago while they tried to make a ritual of Voldemort’s death were far more powerful.

That left two.

One was evidently the Champion of Unity, and he was holding the Grail in his hands. Of his general appearance, Alexandra could say nothing, as it was hidden behind a veil of pure Light magic.

And the twelfth enemy was Ra, of course.

“By now you must have realised your forces are on the edge of annihilation. I propose you pack your trunks and get out of this lovely city before dawn. Stop the bloodbath, Archmage. If you do, there’s a chance the Statute may live another day.”

“**The Statute has served its purpose...and I will have my victory**.”

Why wasn’t she surprised?

“For that you will have to duel me...and unlike what happened at Hogsmeade, you don’t have an army anymore. In fact, I think your organisation will need to be renamed ‘Company of Light’ or ‘Platoon of Light’ soon...just to reflect the size of your dwindling goals, you know.”

“**UNITY!**”

Oh great, more Nephilim...wait a minute, they were all corpses, he wasn’t going to be able to use them, so why-

There was a brilliant flash, and a long and dangerous sword materialised, as light once again banished temporarily the night.

And yes, having seen it once, there was no doubt.

It was *Excalibur*.

“Ah, the classics...come to me Clarent. I have seen the dead of Camlann, and I know what is at stake.”

A second later, her sword was in her left hand. It was a welcome confirmation that with all the rules the Light had broken, there were consequences to pay, Archmage or not.

Unexpectedly, the Champion of Unity didn’t move.

It was Ra who seized Excalibur and advanced towards her.

Not good.

“**For too long, you have challenged the Light! This ends here and now**!”

There was no incantation spoken. The sceptre levitating by his side didn’t shine.

The apocalypse in white flames came into existence and rushed to claim her.

Alexandra had already thrown as many ossicles as she could in the air.

“I am the sword of the Morrigan and my verdict is death! The Dead are to be devoured! AMMIT!”

What came out of the void was utterly malevolent.

It was dangerous.

It was Black Magic coming from the Plane of Darkness.

It was...unpleasant.

But the two attacks clashed into each other...and hers swallowed greedily the white flames.

Then there was a new, more powerful explosion...and when the smoke died down, Ra was standing, looking absolutely uninjured.

No, not uninjured. There was a slight cut on his cheek...and a single drop of blood came out of it.

“It seems rumours of your own invincibility are...just rumours, Lord Archmage.” Unfortunately, she wouldn’t be able to replicate it, the dead of the Plaza had been consumed by the Devourer.

Ra *moved*.

Alexandra parried the first blow...and shouted in surprise at the sheer strength of it.

And then the second blow came heavier, as if a mountain had struck her.

The third blow was about twice the weight of the second.

Ra cast again, and it came so fast Alexandra had to transform to counter the blow.

It still terribly hurt...though she had her revenge as she spit in his face, and her inner animal did the rest.

The attacks came, and there was no weakness, no flaw, it was just an onslaught of spells and-

*PAIN*

For a second, Alexandra swore she was flying...and then she realised it was indeed the truth.

Then she crashed into the walls of the Basilica San Marco, and her sportswear burned all around her, the clothes proving unable to stand against the white flames. Fragarach stabbed the pavement out of her range.

Magic spells came at her. Alexandra pushed her sword out of her mind and tried to Accio her wand.

Her magical focus returned in her hand, but it instantly burned, and there was nothing she could do to extinguish the cursed fire. One of her arms was severed, and suffering exploded inside her chest and soon, in every part of her body.

The green-eyed witch tried to stand, but all strength seemed to abandon her. Damn it, she had to rise, it couldn’t be over, not like that-

“**Foolish runt**,” a force that seemed irresistible seized her throat and slowly began to strangle her, “**I was old when the pyramids were young. You call yourself Champion of the Dark, but for me, you are merely an insect**.”

And then she heard the screams.

The survivors of the Army of Light and the Trinity were screaming.

“Release her, or your dogs will go to Niflheim.”

Alexandra stared directly in the Archmage’s eyes, and the hatred in them was absolutely blinding...and it was really simple to understand that it wasn’t hers that was the target of this fanaticism. She was just the last in a long series he wanted to obliterate.

But apparently, there were things more important than her.

The titanic grasp over her throat was released. Ra reappeared several metres away.

Alexandra fell to her knees, her inner animal once again pouring strength and vitality in her body. Her arm began to regenerate.

“**This was an error to come alone, spawn of Chaos**.”

“A good thing, then, that I am not alone.”

One by one they came out of the shadows.

Romeo Malatesti, Champion of Ares and War.

Lucrezia Sforza, Champion of Venus and Desire.

Teleklos Arali, Champion of Tiamat and Corruption.

Yegor Poliakov, Champion of Seth and Confusion.

And of course, clad in a black and purple armour with runes that had to be proscribed in most ICW countries, Lyudmila Romanov was here, the spear Gungnir in her right hand.

“You took your time,” Alexandra complained.

“Some people,” Malatesti retorted, looking directly at Poliakov, “had to be convinced...”

“**Is that all?**” Ra was...calm. Too calm. “**Six insects against one**?”

With a twitch of the fingers, the eleven other white-robed wizards were separated from Romanov and an enormous wall of light forced the Dark Queen to jump away. The torture spells the Tsar’s daughter had used immediately broke, and the Grail’s power seemed to shine twice brighter.

“Not six,” Eleonora da Riva announced her arrival by instantly decreasing the power of this protection, “seven Champions.”

This time, it was enough to generate an expression of fury on the Avatar’s face.

“**Your name will be condemned to be utterly forgotten, traitor to Innocence**.”

“This is for my Power to decide, not you.”

“Yes, yes,” Loki’s Champion mocked, “we are here to fight, not waste our time in melodramatic accusations. Let us kill this old fossil for good!”

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

The Venetian Lagoon was burning.

The bastions of the Light were burning.

It was a night of fire...and death.

You didn’t need to have centuries of experience to know what was going to happen.

The island of San Michele was not a cemetery-island or whatever Ra had intended it to be.

It was the nesting place of the Summon...the canvas the Exchequer had planned to change the world.

“How ironic,” Fleur Delacour commented as she watched the war raging in the city, “that both the Light and the Dark’s plans have come crashing down.”

There had been several Seals activated in the last hours, to be sure. Two or three, as far as she could ascertain. It was not enough for the Dark. There had only been five of them before tonight, and that left too many in the wind to gain a final victory.

The Champions of the Doge and Night Court weren’t going to be granted a complete victory.

But this night would end in the Light’s defeat, one way or another.

It couldn’t be otherwise, not when the corpses of the Army of Light and the Trinity were numbered in the low thousands.

Ra had led the Light into a trap, and all his servants were paying the price for it. Fleur had seen countless mages being ambushed in dark alleys and dragged to their deaths into the canals. And every Light wizard or witch who had tried to face the Summon fuelling the inferno had been incinerated within seconds.

The French Champion didn’t turn her head when the loud footsteps arrived behind her. The protections of Ca’Bellicosa had remained intact, and the garrison of the Doge Court had not given the alarm.

Therefore it could be only one being.

“I know why you are here.”

“**Really**?”

Fleur cleared her throat, trying not to shiver as the voice was intimidating.

“When I was young, my mother told me the legend of the Megalith of Ys. I know what it is capable of doing. I know what the Summon you unleashed is capable of doing. You are transforming the very landscape of Venice to suit your plans.”

“**That one victory is denied to me doesn’t mean other goals can’t be achieved**.”

As far as sincere statements went, it was a relatively honest one.

“A volcano to transform the lagoon into a lake. The Megalith to be sure the lake will be magical and the direct line you need with the element of water. But you don’t have a Champion of Water.”

“**There are many potential candidates**.”

There was a sort of...magical cacophony in the distance. It was as if a bell of doom had decided to ring this time.

Light and Dark were clashing on the Plaza di San Marco.

The Champions were going to fight Ra.

“What do you want from me?”

A box barely big enough to contain a necklace was levitated...and when Fleur opened it, it revealed a sizeable ruby.

But it was obvious it was only a ruby in appearance. It was far, far more than that.

“**One of the last shards I was able to save from the artefacts forged by the will of *Prometheus***.”

“The Titan who brought Fire to Mankind...how symbolic.” Fleur closed the box. “Will it...complete my transition?”

“**It will**.”

“It is...did it happen before? I don’t know if I can-“

“**Remember, Champion...the journey always begins with a choice**.”

Silence fell. When Fleur Delacour turned her head, the visitor had disappeared as mysteriously as he had arrived.

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

Predictably, Lyudmila cast the first attack.

Alexandra didn’t understand the language, but the core of the message was clear: the Tsar’s daughter called darkness and commanded it to eliminate the Light.

And Chaos answered.

*Things* began to crawl out of the night, and unlike her Runic call to the Egyptian Devourer, it was not a pale shadow of the Dark.

It was truly **Chaos**.

The *things* attacked, and they were shadow and monsters in one.

For the first time, Ra erected shields after shields, going fully on the defensive...and for good reason.

“Summons,” Alexandra had intended to say it loud and clear, but after it, she coughed. Damn it, Ra had really caused a lot of damage...

A palm shining in white magic against her chest was a nice relief.

“Thanks,” the Hydra Animagus told Eleonora da Riva, who had just begun casting several healing spells on her.

“Don’t mention it,” the Champion of Innocence replied, “you saved likely thousands of lives by fighting the Archmage. The minutes you delayed him likely saved everything.”

“I don’t feel like I saved a lot, I...the bastard got my blood! That’s why he’s shielding himself!”

Her left arm would be fully regrown in a few minutes, but the Archmage had exsanguinated her old one, coalesced it into a sphere of crystal to make sure it was out of their reach, and then delivered it to the Grail’s wielder.

“That’s...incredibly bad.” Eleonora admitted. “But you can’t battle him again. You need time to recover.”

Alexandra grimaced...but didn’t argue. How could she argue the point when she couldn’t stand on her own?

“My life...isn’t in danger. Do you have something...that can cause him serious pain?”

“Not conventionally,” Alexandra blinked at the strange answer. The Champion of Innocence elaborated quickly, understanding her confusion. “I am a Unicorn Animagus. If Ra killed me, yes, my death curse would cause him enormous damage, but I would prefer not to die to achieve that.”

“And evidently, he is aware of your inner animal.” For all the talk of treason, Ra had yet to send a curse against her, and they were really easy targets, against the walls of the Basilica di San Marco.

“Yes.”

The five Dark Champions went on the offensive. Lyudmila Romanov proved once again she had not usurped her title of Dark Queen. Many times the Exiled had wondered what was her Dark Magic specialty, well now Alexandra had her answer: it was Summoning.

The Ravenclaw Champion didn’t know half of the names of the *Chaos things* that were called to battle, but they were extremely powerful.

The others weren’t idle, of course. Malatesti had conjured thousands of metallic feathers, and was busy forging more and more swords, becoming a cyclone of death.

Lucrezia Sforza was creating a near-infinite number of spheres that smelled like poison, and the bombardment she did with them was literally disintegrating the stones of Venice.

Teleklos Arali was wielding the black flames of hell, and with every move of his wand, many Light shields failed, collapsing as if the flames sucked all their energy.

And Poliakov...Poliakov seemed to take great pleasure in puppeteering two Knights of the Light into attacking the other protectors of the Grail, which likely represented the greatest danger to Ra.

But for all the assault, for all the devastating array of curses and forbidden incantations uttered...at no point Ra panicked or showed the slightest sign of frustration.

They were completely outmatched and-

“**Enough. The Chalice of Plagues is almost ready with the blood unwilling given. Let’s finish this**.”

Alexandra had seen him flash-teleport before, but she hadn’t exactly realised what her eyes were telling her to. This time as a spectator, she could see better...and there wasn’t enough time to shout a warning.

Excalibur went for a decapitating strike, and one second later, Poliakov’s head rolled on the ruined pavement, neatly separated from its body.

The two wizards he had turned against their comrades screamed before collapsing. Their deaths had been nearly instantaneous.

“What in-“

Teleklos Arali had not even the time to finish his imprecation was on him, and the Light flames and Excalibur wounded him in a single heartbeat so badly that she knew immediately it was over for him.

“**You really thought by combining your useless skills you would be able to challenge me? I am the Archmage of Light! I am the hand guiding Fate! I will deny you victory forever**!”

The boasting was a mistake. It gave Alexandra a few seconds...a few seconds to pour every spark of magic she could, call Fragarach in her hand, and charge.

It was just in time, as her blade parried the blow that was destined for Lucrezia’s neck.

“No,” the Champion of Death had to grit her teeth to not scream in pain...Excalibur was close, and its radiance was a curse in itself. “You have killed enough tonight with your folly, abomination.”

“**Your arrogance is only matched by your ignorance, insect. I have mastered all the forms of magic, and your inferior tools can’t stand against me**.”

Excalibur...Alexandra felt its hunger, its desire to break and dominate everything.

And under her terrified eyes, Alexandra watched as Fragarach’s blade began to melt.

Alexandra jumped away, and Lucrezia helped cover her withdrawal by throwing countless poisons into the fray.

They weren’t fast enough.

Alexandra transformed, and she escaped the blast mostly undamaged...but Fragarach did not. Half of her blade disintegrated into splinters.

Suddenly, only one half of a blade remained in her hand along with the hilt...and Alexandra felt more hatred at Ra than she had ever felt.

This was hers. Fragarach, Clarent...it was hers. It had been a part of her life, she had slain Basilisks with it, and it had saved her from many perilous situations. And now it was destroyed.

“**Your sword is broken, insect**.” The malice and the evil joy of this monster were evident. At this very moment, the young Champion realised this was part of what made the Archmage; a desire to destroy everything he didn’t approve of.

But she couldn’t let it go unanswered.

“My sword will be forged anew.” Though she had no idea as to how. Fragarach had been a treasure of a lost age, even the Queen of the Exchequer had only modified it for her purposes... “And I will kill you for what you’ve done.”

“**A vain and pathetic threat**,” Ra said as the power of the Grail began to coalesce in a corona of madness, “**for you are all going to die here**.”

Excalibur was raised again.

The Archmage flash-teleported...and was forced to stop, as an enormous cloud of darkness kept his cursed light far away from Romeo Malatesti.

“**Brother**,” Osiris, Avatar of Darkness and King of the Exchequer, spoke in a voice as terrible as the obscurity he was cloaked into, “**it is time for your madness to end**.”

**16 February 1995, Island of San Michele, Venetian Lagoon**

The Summon was gone. It had returned to its Plane, and for that, she was thankful.

She wouldn’t have had the courage to face it alone...but she couldn’t stay away from the growing volcano that was destroying San Michele.

Fleur felt like she was burning deep inside.

It had been unpleasant at first, but now, it was good.

It was burning away many things that had leashed her before.

It was burning the Aspect of Life she had been the Champion of.

It was an unworthy Aspect, she understood it now.

It had been something to urge her to smite the Dark.

But it was not the purpose of **Life**.

The purpose of **Life** was to **burn**.

Because Life deserved to be lived, gloriously, without regret.

**Life** was a time of celebrations. **Life** was to be lived and enjoyed until Death came to claim you.

As she climbed the fuming rocks, the embers and the flames were embracing her, bolstering her assurance and her powers.

Her clothes, already in tatters, were burned, but soon enough her costume answered her call.

It had explained her euphoria yesterday at least; unconsciously, Fleur had felt it was what she was meant to be.

“I understand my mistakes. I purify myself in these flames. I pledge myself to Fire and Life. I let my soul participate in the great cycle of the flames. I will become what magic wants me to be.”

The fire of the origins greeted her like an old friend, and the rumble of a Titan arrived to her ears.

“**Welcome, my Phoenix**.”

Fleur breathed out, and let her soul be bared to the burning caress of Fire.

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

“**Brother, it is time for your madness to end**.”

Ra had not yet answered when everyone present on the Plaza di San Marco felt it.

It was like a hot wind that caressed your skin.

It was like the touch of a friend, and at the same time it was the emotional pain that came with every failure.

It was the flames devouring wood when you wanted to keep yourself warm in the middle of the night, and the ashes which came after bloody battles.

It was **Fire**...it was **Life**...and it was *free*.

The consequences didn’t make themselves wait.

The veiled Champion screamed and struggled to keep the Grail in his hands...but was forced to release it as the gold of the chalice began to run red hot.

The Grail fell.

The Grail fell, and as it hit the stones of Venice, an enormous wave of red-gold magic poured of it, and changed into a bird that was familiar to everyone’s present.

Ra tried to stop it, of course.

But the red-gold Phoenix was too fast, and the attacks of the Archmage struck nothing.

The magical bird flew away, towards the gigantic pyre north of Venice, and disappeared to her senses soon enough.

Alexandra laughed. The Archmage had forged the Grail using the seven Powers which stood for the Light, but quite evidently, what had stood for millennia had just ended tonight.

The Grail was heavily damaged. There was a large fissure which had broken the apparent perfection forever.

“Okay...I am pretty happy to not have killed Fleur Delacour.” And if the Ravenclaw Champion giggled afterwards, well...yes, they were witnesses, but given the circumstances, it was way too funny to not express her joy. All the things she had lost tonight were worth it.

Ra’s face was enough to confirm *that*.

For the first time, the Archmage of the Light looked really...unfortunately, Alexandra didn’t know him enough to describe all his emotions, but there was definitely anger and panic visible in his eyes, at least.

“**Galahad**,” the Avatar of the Light said at last. Wait, what? “**All is not lost. Take the Grail with you, and flee. The ritual destined to use the Chalice of Plagues has failed, but it can be cast again. Go back to the roots of the Light, and await my arrival**.”

“Yes, my Lord! By your will!”

The fire magic that had turned the Grail temporarily to an incandescent temperature was gone. The white-robed man who had been given the name of the ‘Perfect Knight’ obeyed the command he had been given, grabbed the Chalice, and ran away from the Plaza di San Marco.

Lyudmila and Lucrezia tried to strike him down, but Ra easily deflected their attacks.

One second later, Longbottom woke up from his cocoon of light...and began to imitate his fellow Champion.

“**Nothing to say, Osiris? Nothing to acknowledge the failure of your grand plan?”**

“AAARRRRRGGGH!”

The Champion of Unity had not managed to reach the arches part of the Museo Correr that he had let the Grail fail again.

“**Ra**.” The Avatar of Darkness’ voice was disappointment incarnate. “**Please tell me you weren’t stupid enough to forge the Chalice with a single ritual chain**.”

“**It is no concern of yours. Galahad! Leave the Grail! Chosen One! Go with him! I am going to deal with the Grail and Osiris myself**.”

“**And how are you going to deal with the Grail in the first place?**” The King of the Exchequer inquired politely. “**It is nothing more than the equivalent of a magical nuclear bomb, thanks to your inability to conceive rigorously safe rituals**.”

“**I HAVE NO LESSON TO RECEIVE FROM YOU!**”

For the first time, Ra did truly look...mad.

The ‘Egyptian scribe-priest’ vibe was gone.

The fanaticism, the madness, the megalomania...everything was revealed. A pity the two Light Champions couldn’t see it as they fled...of course they were already thoroughly brainwashed, so maybe it wouldn’t be enough.

Ra uttered a curse that looked vaguely Egyptian.

Thousands of white rays burst into existence. A second after, they multiplied by ten times.

It was like an infinite number of white suns came to kill them all.

The King of the Exchequer waved his right hand, and the incantation’s effect were swallowed by the darkness as if it was nothing.

And when Osiris spoke again, the words weren’t destined to his brother.

“**Champion of the Morrigan**.”

“Yes.”

“**There is a secret passage in the Basilica behind you. You know how to find it. The Champion of War gave away the Emerald Key to bait you in the cells of the Ducal Palace**. **It will lead you outside the city**.”

“But...we need to stay. All the spectators...everyone is asleep!” Including all her friends and her girlfriend, but saying it aloud might not be wise. “They will be-“

“**They will be safe. I am going to give you the time you need. Go**!”

“**No, she won’t**!” Ra snarled...only for him to erect a shield in catastrophe to stop a curse that seemed straight out of a hell pit itself. An image of a Black Pyramid was conjured, and the hisses of thousands of Styx Vipers echoed across Venice.

“**GO**!”

Alexandra ran.

She ran with all the strength her legs had left, and all the other Champions present ran behind her.

“Alohomora! Depulso!”

The gates of the Basilica San Marco were opened forcefully with no regard for their venerable age.

Fortunately, the Emerald Key began to shine after five seconds, and the mirror hidden behind the decorations was really easy to find.

“Here!” This time there was no time to verify if it was safe. “Lucrezia! Shout when you are on the other side!”

“I will!” The Succubus rushed first into the secret passage, quickly followed by Malatesti, then Eleonora...and then Alexandra realised that the sounds of battle had all ceased.

And all her senses, both of a witch and a Lernaean Hydra screamed *danger*.

“Chaos! Into the mirror!”

The Dark Queen pushed her, they crossed the freezing surface covering the secret passage, and she hit something hard...and everything became darkness.

**Author’s note**:

Some readers were wondering how many chapters would be needed for the Fourth Task.

The answer was three, I can now reveal it. Yes, the Fourth Task is over, though it is unofficial, for now (it can hardly be otherwise, with all the Judges unconscious).

Of course, the Carnival Civil War abruptly interrupted doesn’t mean the time of challenges is over, quite the contrary.

The Statute of Secrecy has pretty much received the equivalent of a Killing Curse, and Osiris’ last words weren’t just to reassure Alexandra.

The story of *The odds were never in my favour* will continue in chapter 104, tentative title: *A Knight’s Quest*.

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