**Chapter 97**

**The Death of Innocence**

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

Cho had intended to speak with the Champion of House Ravenclaw the moment she entered the ‘Breakfast Hall’, but extraordinarily, Alexandra Potter was nowhere to be seen.

And yes, it was quite extraordinary, because the athletic Ravenclaw girl had slept quite late in Cedric’s bed, before moving on to more pleasurable activities.

One moment she had been slightly worried her teenage benefactor had already eaten her breakfast and left, but a few quick questions to Roger Davies confirmed that no, the winner of the Third Task had not been seen since yesterday evening.

Ultimately, the Chinese-looking Ravenclaw substitute had the time to enjoy two-thirds of her breakfast before Alexandra Potter showed up...Susan Bones on her heels, and a lot of lipstick belonging to the Hufflepuff redhead where the witch’s robes didn’t hid it.

Truly it seemed she hadn’t been the only one to decide to have fun last night...

It took a few minutes for the two lovebirds to separate...mainly because one went to the Hufflepuff table, where Hannah Abbot waited with a predatory expression, and the green-eyed fourth-year – assuming something like it mattered when you could win Tournament Tasks by yourself – sat at her table.

Obviously, Cho wasn’t exactly the focus of the other Ravenclaw witch’s attention. This ‘honour’ was directed at the food, which went to pile up massively in the plates before Potter.

The winner’s stomach had to be filled up; everything could wait.

It was only after devouring pastries, fruits, marmalade, with large doses of fruit juice to improve the taste or something else, that the Ravenclaw Champion at last looked like she was aware of her surroundings.

“Hey, Cho.” For once, this was rather a sleepy tone.

Cho repressed a chuckle; it wouldn’t do to laugh too much...not when she was ‘guilty’ of activities falling in the same category.

“Good morning. Exhausted from all your nightly activities?”

The younger witch rolled her eyes.

“The Task was tiring too, you know. But yeah, I didn’t get a lot of sleep...too much to do and to think about.”

Cho hesitated, before deciding to ask the question that burned her lips.

“Do you have a plan for me during the Fourth Task? Because-“

“Cho,” the most powerful witch of their generation on the British Isles sighed loudly, “if you want to join Cedric and help him for fifteen days while gallivanting in the streets of Venice, you can ask directly. I’m not offended.”

“Oh,” sometimes Cho wondered how Alexandra Potter managed to go straight to the heart of some subjects while protesting a few seconds later that she wasn’t a Legilimens. “Well, then, consider this to be my permission request.”

A few fruits were eaten with no emotion whatsoever before the Ravenclaw Champion shrugged.

“Sure, you can support your boyfriend for this Task. And no, to answer your first question, I didn’t intend to use your talents for this Task. You have my blessings to help Cedric in the streets of Venice.”

Cho blinked. She wasn’t going to be ungrateful, but it was way easier than she had thought it would be.

“Err...my thanks. That said-“

“Why do I sound like I am not desperate for your services?” Green eyes stared at her, and it would have been intimidating, if the sleepiness wasn’t dominating, though it rapidly decreased as the food pile disappeared. “The principal reason is because I will advise you not to play with Alchemy in Venice.”

“Excuse me?”

Cho’s thoughts froze. Alchemy was her legacy and her ambition, it was-

“There is nothing in the rules the Judges gave us yesterday which will forbid us to use Alchemy. The key rule is not to break the Statute, and I am not going to draw an Alchemy triangle in public-“

“Cho. It isn’t what the Judges said. It’s what they didn’t. Unless I gain access to the full Task rules and can debunk this theory, I can only assume that the Champions and whoever will play the role of ‘Artificers’ and other specific agents *are officially part of the Tournament*.”

Alexandra Potter drank a large volume of apple juice before giving her a sardonic expression.

“In other words, you can be targeted and killed. And when Alchemic experiments are already extremely dangerous by themselves...”

“It wouldn’t be too difficult for an opposing party to organise a few accidents,” the Chinese-looking teenager completed. “But surely as Queen of the Night Court, you can protect me from lethal threats, right?”

The silence she received in return was a thunderous answer by itself.

“I can guarantee that I won’t try to kill you...or to injure you significantly, or whatever assurance you want. But I am only a single Champion, and even if I had the certainty all my Court will obey diligently and faithfully my commands...and I don’t...there are two other Courts. And one has a Light Champion who thought it clever to push his ‘ally’ into a pool filled with lethal Potions. Keep that in mind, Cho.”

The older Ravenclaw witch grimaced. Yes, in her eagerness to be with Cedric, that was a detail she had overlooked.

“You think I shouldn’t try to participate?”

“I don’t know,” the blunt admission was quite unlike her...but then at least she was honest. “I don’t know. There are so many things we don’t know about this Task...in my opinion, it’s better to wait for a week before making any promise you can’t keep...but it’s just my opinion, Cho.”

“Duly noted.”

And yes, it wasn’t a bad suggestion at all. As much as she wanted to support Cedric, the fifth-year Ravenclaw didn’t want to die. And if they were targets from all the psychopaths participating in the Tournament...

Cho shuddered at the thought of facing the Dark Queen or someone like Romeo Malatesti in a dark alley alone, or worse, in the middle of an Alchemy experiment transforming a house into a furnace.

“You have a gift to be optimistic in the morning, don’t you?”

Her comment didn’t create a smile or any form of sarcastic retort...not when the daughter of the Succubus Headmistress had decided to approach Alexandra Potter and whisper some words no one but Cho and the Ravenclaw Champion could hear.

“The Queen politely requests your presence. Now.”

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Alexandra wasn’t happy to have her breakfast interrupted.

Unfortunately, an ‘invitation’ of a legendary sorceress wasn’t exactly something she could ignore.

Or rather, yes, she could ignore it...to her risks and perils. There would be some price to pay in the hours or days to come if she didn’t.

In the seconds it had taken her to think about it, the Potter Heiress had decided it was better to go to the bathroom a couple of minutes to get half-presentable and then get to hear what the half-sister of King Arthur wanted.

The sooner the Champion of the Morrigan heard the bad news from her predecessors’ mouth, the longer she would have to think of a solution.

And yes, Alexandra had no problem believing it was bad news. You didn’t summon someone so quickly after the Third Task to give someone compliments.

“Any idea what it is about?” Alexandra asked as they climbed up a series of stairs leading Lucrezia and she to a magnificent gallery of Renaissance-style paintings and statues with a distinct winter theme of snowballs, ice skating competitions, and villages celebrating some ancient holy days she was not familiar with.

“Yes, but I have been ordered not to tell you-“

The end of the sentence was cut abruptly short, as the Champion of Lust was pushed aside and a hand stronger than steel grabbed Alexandra by her left shoulder, forcing to stop walking or risk injuring herself.

“Hey!” There was rudeness, and there was that, which was clearly beyond all courtesy limits. “What do you think you’re doing...Longbottom?”

“**You mustn’t go to this meeting**.”

The voice was...powerful, yet hollow.

It was as if someone else than the Gryffindor was speaking...oh.

“That isn’t your decision to make,” Alexandra hissed. “And for the record, there are very few people I have given the permission to touch me, and you aren’t one of them. Release me now, or suffer the consequences.”

“**You mustn’t go to this meeting**.”

Well, she had warned him.

And according to the rules of the Tournament, there were several ways to answer when another Champion decided to provoke you outside of a Task.

Alexandra let her right arm transform, and in the next heartbeat, she punched violently Neville Longbottom in the chest.

To her slight surprise, she wasn’t able to send him on the other side of the gallery away...but it was sufficient to force him to release her shoulder...and he was thrown on a sublime carpet in a ridiculous posture.

“**You mustn’t go to...**you struck me?”

“Oh, look,” Lucrezia Sforza commented acidly as she pointed her wand at an invisible spot between the Champion of Fate’s eyes. “The puppet is finally aware of what’s going on.”

“I am not a puppet!” The Gryffindor protested predictably – and loudly.

“You are...oh, Day King.” While she thought the danger had passed, Alexandra had drawn her wand...just as a precaution, of course. “By pure curiosity, did you meet the Archmage on your way to breakfast?”

“I...no! At least, I don’t think...no, I didn’t meet our Professor!”

That Dumbledore had willingly hired the Light psychopath was something Alexandra would not forgive. The Champion of the Morrigan didn’t doubt Ra was capable of inviting himself to the Tournament, but was it really necessary to give him a position of power over naive students?

“He’s saying the truth,” the Succubus next to her confirmed after a moment of silence and a wordless Charm. “I think the influx of Fate he received was made by someone else...ah. The touch is unmistakably Norse.”

“Falk.” If the green-eyed Champion uttered the word like a curse, it was because it indeed was her intention.

“Yes.”

“Hey, you can’t throw around accusations like-“

“Shut up,” the Venetian Champion for the first time spoke in plain English, and her tone was one of a teacher addressing a dumb student. “Light fools like yourself...you gave me the urge to vomit.”

“I am not-“

“Either you are in control and Falk is innocent, or you are not.” The Champion of Lust went to a battle-stance. “If it is the former, you made aggressive moves outside of a Task. It is a deed that will cost you many Tournament points and open an investigation. In the latter case, you are innocent, and we will blame Falk in private. Which option do you want me to choose?”

“The...the...latter...but...hey, the next minutes were...a bit hazy. And...okay, Potter! That wasn’t my fault!”

“It wasn’t your fault, oh Day King?” Alexandra raised both eyebrows theatrically, despite feeling absolutely no amusement. “Forgive me, but at this hour, I think you have four Champions sworn to your Court. Henri de Condé. Lucas Gauthier. Cedric Diggory. And last but not least...Frode Falk.”

“What, because you would have taken him as part of your Court?”

Sometimes Alexandra really wondered if there was a special hell for the Gryffindors after the Morrigan – or whatever Aspect of Death was in charge of them – collected their souls. Surely the spectacular amount of stupidity they sprouted on a daily basis deserved a fair and eternal punishment, right?

“Unless you have forgotten,” she gritted her teeth, “there is a third Court. If you had asked for my opinion, I would have told you it was better to let Malatesti have him...at least this way we would have seen the two conspire to murder each other and we would have been happy to watch the fireworks from afar.”

Maybe the Exchequer would have tried to manipulate everything in the shadows...again...but Alexandra wouldn’t know if it was the case or not, because Longbottom had fallen into the first trap prepared on his path of stupidity.

“You didn’t think with your head,” the Champion of Death continued, noting that for all the strength she had used with her arm, Longbottom looked perfectly fine. Whether it was Fate at work or some Animagus resistance remained to be determined. “You let a treacherous backstabber into your Court, and evidently the favourite murderer of the Archmage has something to make sure all Light Champions like yourself will be nothing but puppets when the signal comes.”

In a way, it confirmed the worst fears Alexandra had about the Fourth Task. The canals of Venice were going to run red with blood.

But it was far better to know in advance...that way the Potter Heiress would be prepared.

“We are not puppets!”

Alexandra looked at Longbottom like he was an imbecile...and to be truthful, that was exactly what she felt about him at that moment.

Next to her, Lucrezia Sforza’s face mirrored her feelings of disgust.

The dark-haired Champion turned around.

“Oh...err...thanks for...the help. Thanks for telling Fred and George to help me.”

It was about the last thing she expected to hear by that point...and Alexandra was very close to giggle. Of all the things to say after this rude intervention...well, at least Longbottom wasn’t completely lost...though how long it was going to stay that way remained a very good question.

“You’re welcome. Though honesty compels me to admit I did it because Cedric and you needed help. Now if you excuse me, I have an important meeting to go to, and by your fault, I think we are going to be very late...”

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As far as magical disturbances went, the one Henri felt wasn’t that big.

But the simple fact he ‘heard’ it with his senses of Champion was particularly telling.

“The Archmage must have tried something.”

The scion of the de Condé line had wondered if Ra was going to try something as Lucrezia Sforza had abandoned more or less all subtlety and went to speak with Alexandra Potter.

Evidently, the answer to this fascinating question was ‘yes’.

“Again.” Eleonora added with a voice which did well to hide her anger...if you didn’t know her.

“Yes, again,” the Champion of Horus breathed out before deciding to abandon the idea of eating what was left of his breakfast. The ‘news’ had really killed his appetite. “I suppose it didn’t go well...as usual.”

“This is very surprising,” the Champion of Innocence delivered the words with dark humour. “Oh, wait! Until you figure Champions are not authorised to fight each other except during Tournament Tasks.”

“Yes,” Henri simply said. “But he might have figured with the recent success Fate earned in the Third Task-“

“Fate can summon miracles into existence,” Eleonora didn’t let him finish his sentence, “but it isn’t sufficiently powerful to give a Champion of the Dark a brainwashing. And that’s exactly what it would take for Death to choose the Army of Light before the Exchequer. No, Henri. The only way the Light can intervene is physically...which, if successful, would result likely in enormous financial and point penalties for the Champion doing it. My conclusion is that this outcome would be...totally counter-productive.”

“I’m not saying this is untrue or that you aren’t right,” Henri de Condé said slowly, “but no matter what the Avatar of the Dark wants with the youngest Champion of his side, your ‘Night Court is at a severe disadvantage. I have a good idea why they made sure the rules are against them. It doesn’t change the reality that indeed a few Champion eliminations are enough to lead them to defeat...or that in the past, the Dark Champions haven’t exactly been famous for their teamwork skills.”

Eleonora hesitated for a couple of seconds...before nodding grimly.

“You’re right, of course. And no, I’m not fully convinced my Court will win. The rules are stacked against us, and the Archmage is going to try everything in his power to make sure the Light wins again. My reasoning to do what I did was to be able to look in a mirror every morning without trying to stab myself with a long dagger.”

Henri grimaced. Simply imagining it was an image he would have loved to avoid thinking about...and he knew Eleonora wasn’t joking.

“I understand. And if I had known beforehand that the credulous Champion of Fate would accept Falk’s pledge without any guarantees as to his behaviour, I would have done my utmost to avoid the Day Court.”

“Including entertaining the idea of pledging yourself to the Doge Court?” Eleonora asked cheekily.

“Including the Doge Court,” the Champion of Horus replied deadly seriously, and the smile of his fellow Light Champion vanished instantly. “Malatesti is a warmongering brute, but at least he can be trusted to behave as a warmongering brute and the worst thing he can do to a Light Champion is to kill us.”

Whereas their ‘allies’...Henri acted calmly outwardly, but inside, he was fuming. This was a very bad situation, and like an imbecile, he had rushed into the first trap the Archmage had prepared to neutralise him.

“You will have to make your own preparations.” He didn’t say ‘I’m sorry’, but his tone conveyed the feeling accurately, he hoped. “The moment the Fourth Task begins, you will need to act as if I’m compromised, mentally, magically, and physically.”

Years ago, Henri had been told the benefits of being a Champion of the Light included some protections against the great and terrible Avatar of the Dark.

Never had he imagined that one day, he would have to worry about the Avatar of the Light could do to him...

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The room had few modern lights to illuminate it, but it was the only reproach which could be made.

There was a lot of crystal, be it in the form of glasses, old-fashioned candlesticks, or magically enchanted statues which had to be worth a Lord’s ransom.

There was gold and onyx. There was a lot of furniture, and given the style and the themes, they were certainly ordered when the Kings and Queens of the eighteenth century were still alive.

It was a warm atmosphere, despite having no window. The carpets looked incredibly soft and inviting, and there were several paintings of...okay, the characters of each looked to be participating in various orgies of sex and debauchery.

It was likely her host had borrowed the room for a few hours, because Alexandra didn’t think the Queen of the Exchequer was the type to enjoy that kind of decorations...though when it came down to it, what did Alexandra really know about Morgane beyond the Light propaganda of ‘Morgana La Fay’?

Very little.

The former Champion of Death had been the half-sister of King Arthur and the mother of Mordred. After Merlin and his allies forged Excalibur in a ritual which should never have been thought of, never mind cast, the woman who would one day become the Queen of the Exchequer had forged Fragarach so that her daughter would have a chance to kill the son of Uther Pendragon. By becoming a Vampiri Romani, Morgane had likely been able to survive a wound from Excalibur, an exploit only the dragon Nidhögg could boast, to her best knowledge.

The powerful Dark Witch had survived the tormented era of Camlann, and went to survive around one thousand and five hundred years, at some point becoming either the right hand or some powerful advisor of the King of the Exchequer.

Yes, the green-eyed Ravenclaw was very well aware that she knew practically *nothing* about Morgane.

The armchair she was escorted with extreme courtesy was green, with golden sigils moving here and there, nice combination of Runes and enchantments, by the way.

Lucrezia Sforza, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, took a red armchair several metres behind her. Visibly, the Succubus Champion was trusted enough to hear the conversation, but not high enough in the Exchequer’s hierarchy to participate.

“Tea? Coffee? Chocolate?”

“No, thank you.” Alexandra replied. “I just finished breakfast.”

The Queen of the Exchequer nodded, and a crystal glass levitated to the black seat she had sat into.

Having Hydra’s senses, Alexandra knew from the moment the bottle next to the glass was uncorked that it was not wine the former Dark Champion was going to drink.

Yeah, this kind of carmine liquid was likely blood...mixed with some exotic magical spice? The rest of the smell was quite unfamiliar.

“Your victory during the Third Task,” the Queen spoke after drinking slowly the beverage, “was quite impressive and ingenious. The preparation was excellent and managed to keep everyone in the dark, and the execution was theatrical and flawless.”

“Err...thanks? I mean, I appreciate the compliments...”

“As well, you should,” a vampiric smile with a lot of teeth manifested itself. “I wouldn’t have been able to do it when I was your age.”

Well, technically, if there hadn’t been Fred and George plus a lot of help, Alexandra wouldn’t have been able to do it either...oh, and there was Slughorn’s tutorship for the Potions, and Cho for the lore of the Alchemical reagents.

“But,” ah, damn, “this ingenuity concerns *us*.”

Since the Queen of the Exchequer wasn’t megalomaniac or arrogant enough to use the royal ‘we’, it meant her organisation was concerned...and so was the King.

That...wasn’t good at all.

“I heard nowhere it was forbidden to win a Task,” the Potter Heiress said defensively.

“True,” the admission came too fast, too easily, “and will do your utmost to win the next one, without any creatively reinterpreting the rules?”

Alexandra did her best to stay immobile and unflinching before the implacable gaze of the Queen.

“No,” since staying on the defensive was not a good idea, or so she felt, Alexandra went on the offensive, “but perhaps I wouldn’t consider it if the odds were in my favour, especially where the rules are concerned.”

The Queen of the Exchequer closed her eyes, and there was no retort.

“Of course, I can only make hypotheses,” the young Ravenclaw witch continued, “but given what I know of the Fourth Task, I can freely admit I see a big flaw in the rules. The Night Court is extremely disadvantaged in terms of victory conditions...but ensuring the other Courts lose with the Night is well within my reach.”

It wouldn’t be difficult, she had told Morag yesterday evening, but the risks were manageable. Neville Longbottom was the Day King, and though Fate would try to protect him, the not-neutral Power would have enormous difficulties to keep this ‘Deus ex machina’ power active for fifteen days.

“Under those conditions, I will likely not win, but I won’t lose a lot of points either...and since I’m first in the rankings right now, I can certainly afford to be second or third after the Fourth Task.”

“Indeed you can,” the ancient vampire sorceress agreed. “Indeed you can.”

The repetition was...Alexandra didn’t like at all the voice and the manner to express it.

“But without our help, you will surely die.”

Alexandra blinked.

“Excalibur has not yet entered the game,” the Champion of the Morrigan declared thoughtfully, “and of all the Light Champions and Light-aligned fools present near the Tournament, I don’t think one of them becoming the wielder would represent an insurmountable threat.”

The blade forged by Merlin was incredibly dangerous, but it wasn’t a ‘point it in this direction, Alexandra dies’. In fact, the fact Arthur’s weapon had not yet reappeared said very sad things about the state of the Light those days.

“Don’t underestimate Excalibur. But yes, I agree this abomination does not represent certain death for you. Unfortunately, Excalibur never was the most dangerous weapon forged by the Light. The Archmage has many other weapons in his service...and they come by three. Can you guess which part of the Arthurian Legends are no myths but true, monstrous creations?”

Alexandra passed a hand in her hair...and grimaced inwardly.

The ardent reader of Tolkien had visited frequently the Hogwarts Library after her visit in an abandoned citadel. Thus yes, she had a good idea of the weapons Morgane was speaking about.

“Excalibur, of course, the Round Table...and the Grail. I have no idea of what the latter two can do when you need to use military strength, though.”

“What the Round Table is capable of doing isn’t pertinent,” the female Vampiri Romani told her in a dismissive tone, “as it is in our possession. The Grail, on the other hand, is a serious problem. It was the last surviving relic of the previous trio of Light artefacts...one which included the Ark of the Covenant.”

“That isn’t a myth?”

“No,” Morgane seemed to enjoy a lot her astonishment, “unfortunately, no one knows where it is those days. The Ark disappeared well before I was born, and the only rumour we have is the testimony of a Legionnaire who swore ‘his comrades would return it to Alexander’s tomb’.”

A tomb that no one had ever located, and this wasn’t by lack of searching. Yeah, this was something common to the magical and non-magical worlds.

“Returning back to the subject of the Grail, we tried to dispose of it, but the breaking of the Second Seal unfortunately did not sent it to a watery grave; the destruction of the fortress protecting it was a serious blow to the Army of Light, but the Grail was recovered by the Archmage. Bereft of any place to place it on a permanent basis, the Great Enemy keeps it close in a Light-illuminated ritual circle where he can readily access it.”

“That’s...not very reassuring.” Alexandra acknowledged.

“It’s not; and for your personal knowledge, the Grail is also known as the Chalice of Plagues.”

Yes, ‘not reassuring’ was too weak a word.

“Is the name indicative of what its offensive purpose is?” the young Champion asked weakly.

“It is.”

Shit.

Poisons, she could endure, but something like that...there were no guarantees that her Hydra Animagus form would be enough. And even if it was, the rest of her friends and all the people she had grown to like were definitely not immune to something that dangerous.

“Wait a minute...” an idea burst at the forethought of her mind, “surely Ra wouldn’t dare use something that terrible in the middle of the Venetian Carnival. I mean, the rules are good to be interpreted and all that stuff, but even in my most delirious plans, I don’t plan to kill hundreds of people. If Ra releases a plague in the middle of the Carnival, he will kill tens of thousands-

“Millions,” Morgane corrected.

“Mil-“ Alexandra felt very, very afraid suddenly. “How many times did he use it?”

The Queen of the Exchequer gave her a thin smile.

“That’s one of things I enjoy about you, Alexandra. You go straight to the heart of the problem very quickly.” All traces of enjoyment were removed from the scarred face. “And to understand your question, we have physical evidence and eye witnesses that the Archmage used the Grail for genocidal purposes at least six times since it was created.”

Six times. May the Valar be merciful.

“And...there isn’t some magical antidote? I mean, if he used it several times, surely while the first epidemic burned out, you researched ways to stop it, right?”

“We call it the Chalice of *Plagues*, plural, for a reason.” Oh, no. “We don’t know how exactly he was able to forge an Arithmancy matrix into the Grail to make it possible, but we have the complete certainty that the six magical plagues released so far have little in common, and therefore the rare Potions invented to heal someone afflicted by the first, for example, have no effect whatsoever for the latter epidemics.”

And to think she thought the worst of Ra before today. To be ready to kill millions in order to ‘win’ again and again, the Archmage was very much a Sauron of the Light in every aspect she could imagine.

“Surely there has to be a weakness, something that can be exploited.”

Yes, the moment she spoke the words, she regretted it. In front of her was a vampire-sorceress of one thousand and five hundred years, and the rest of the Exchequer had dozens of near-immortal wizards.

Surely neutralising the Grail had to be one of their top priorities...they couldn’t have waited for her birth to pour millions of Galleons into anti-plague cures and healing research.

“So far,” Morgane whimsically spoke, “the only weakness we’ve been able to find is that the presence of dragons repels the Chalice’s Plagues.”

What?

“The noble reptiles are completely immune to the diseases unleashed by the Grail,” the Queen continued, “and staying close to them, as within a metre or two of their scales, tend to be enough to avoid the Plague’s effects. Unfortunately, Ra noticed rather quickly this issue...and since he didn’t like dragons at all before the Grail’s creation, he did his best to exterminate them. And no, the ‘dumb dragons’ which have become the norm after the Statute was enforced aren’t able to provide any degree of protection.”

Meaning...meaning Old Frederick, Nidhögg, the Guardian of Jade, and of course Fingolfin were the only dragons she knew which could provide some decent protection against the ultimate genocidal weapon of Ra.

That was good...until one figured that thanks to the damnable Statute, Alexandra couldn’t exactly walk in the streets of Venice with Fingolfin by her side.

It was...bad.

It was really, really bad.

“Should you tell me all of that? If the Fourth Task is a disaster...”

“There is a reason why it is the Fourth, not the Seventh. We believe in contingencies.”

The Champion of the Morrigan wasn’t going to naysay her on that point.

Yes, she could easily see it. Even if Ra managed to kill all Dark Champions and kill millions, a lot of members of the Exchequer would survive, and those wizards and witches would blame Ra – for good reason – make sure the Light was fatally weakened, and organise something with the remaining Seals years later. The current ritual would fail, of course, but with the world in chaos as a plague reaped millions of wizards and non-wizards, it wasn’t like it would be noticeable for the majority of the people who should watch for it.

And the more she thought about it...

“The key reason why you invited me today, I presume,” the last witch to hold the Potter name said slowly, “is because you have a plan to make sure Ra can’t unleash a new Plague and wipe out the board before you can win.”

The Queen of the Exchequer watched her with...satisfaction?

“You presume correctly. And yes, we dearly desire your cooperation...a cooperation which is in your best interests, I might add, Alexandra. Ra’s goals include the annihilation of his brother and the entirety of our members, but he won’t hesitate killing your friends and your associates if there’s the slightest chance it will make you lower your guard.”

And the worst part...the Morrigan didn’t intervene to say her former Champion was wrong.

“It is very convincing.” Alexandra sighed. “But before I answer by yes or no, I would dearly want to know what exactly do you intend to do during the Venetian Carnival.”

“The exact specifics of the Seals and their activation processes won’t be discussed, for doing so would run the risk of ruining the ritual as a whole,” was the smooth and disappointing answer...at first. “Tell me, Alexandra. Have you heard in your Arithmancy class the term ‘Great Conjunction?’?

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Albus Dumbledore forced a reassuring smile on his lips.

“Thank you, my boy. I assure you I am going to make sure both the Archmage and the Durmstrang Champion stop to interfere. If they don’t desist, they will face unpleasant consequences.”

The Champion of House Gryffindor left, and for a moment the former Supreme Mugwump stayed still...before mumbling a few curses he had learned at Hogwarts and during his numerous travels across Europe.

“What game does the Archmage thinks he is playing?” The silver-bearded wizard asked once he had voiced everything he thought about the new situation.

“He thinks,” Alastor ‘Mad Eye’ Moody’ grunted, “that he is in charge and our part in this affair is to follow the orders like good obedient House Elves.”

The Defeater of Grindelwald grimaced. Several days ago, he would have said his old friend was far too pessimistic.

But that had been days ago. Now he was afraid that the retired Auror, for all his faults, had described perfectly accurately the enormous problem represented by their ‘ally’.

“I think,” the scarred veteran of the War against Voldemort continued, “that in addition to our increase in *constant vigilance*, we should really reconsider our alliance with this...this man.”

“I’ve considered it,” Albus admitted out loud. It was a very recent thing; in fact the thought had really been in mind since yesterday evening. “But there are critical problems that the Order of Phoenix and I can’t solve alone...the most dangerous being the Ward Stone of Hogwarts and the dragon it is siphoning the magic from.”

And if he had any thoughts about fighting the black dragon himself, the Third Task would have killed them in a hurry. The ‘Guardian of Jade’ monster the Dark Wizards had revealed during the fourth challenge phase had been strong enough to give a Fenrir Animagus the fight of her life.

Yes, a Champion of Chaos had been stalemated by a jade-coloured dragon capable of throwing elemental magic attacks.

What a bigger and far more powerful specimen would do once freed from its prison, Albus dearly wished to never discover it.

“His solution,” Alastor’s tone was hardly convinced, “is to delay and delay, not to solve the true problem...I sent a few owls to some old sources in Africa and Europe, and no one has tried to gather the quantities of enchanted Alchemical products you urged him to purchase.”

That was...hardly unexpected, but still very disappointing.

“I see.” The Defeater of Grindelwald grimaced again before swallowing another lemon sweet. Though the taste was as delightful as ever, this time it was accompanied by an unpleasant feeling of defeat. “I dearly hoped he focused on this urgent problem. Especially now that we have the confirmation our local Black Witch not only spoke with the black dragon, but was able to feed it too.”

No matter how hard he tried, Albus wasn’t able to find another explanation why a fourteen-year-old witch knew the recipe of an extremely difficult Potion resulting in the creation of Alchemical-based *sugar*!

“It is a mighty big problem,” since Alastor was hardly the kind to exaggerate, this indeed confirmed how bad the situation was. “And the worst part is that eliminating the Black Witch you have as one of your Champions would solve none of the problems. The dragon prison is going to fail soon; whether she is alive or not will not change anything. The Dark Lords of the Exchequer are waiting in the shadows will survive no matter how many of their younger agents die in this Tournament. Voldemort is out there, trying to gain back followers, resources, and magical power.”

This was a concise summation of some of the great threats that were assailing the Order of the Phoenix all at once...and this confirmed what Albus had known.

“This was a massive trap all along.”

But he, like an idiot, had underestimated the size of the trap, and overestimated the strength of his newfound ‘allies’.

“And I have more bad news.” Moody told him bluntly. “Whatever Ra intends to do during the Fourth Task, be it bathing Venice in blood with his assassins, or trying a ritual to destroy all the inactive Seals, we have to continue the alliance for the time being...because no matter how weak and insufficient our efforts have been from September to January, if we are disunited, the Dark Lords and Ladies will eat our students alive in a few hours. The young monsters of the Exchequer are far more dangerous than the elite Death Eaters of twenty years ago.”

And it was the ‘young monsters’...the old ones were likely on the level of Gellert...at least.

“The bigger source of frustration,” Albus spoke while caressing his beard, “is that I’m still unable to predict what the enemy grand plan is in the first place. They have poured millions of Galleons in this flashy Coliseum and the Tournament organisation, and no doubt they are ready to pour millions more for a fifteen days-long Carnival. And their hidden goal is to create a series of environmental disasters? I don’t believe it for a second.”

While he had not thought about the subject in a very long time, Albus was aware of several things which could unleash catastrophic devastation against either Wizarding or Muggle civilisations. The veteran of the Battle of Berlin couldn’t create a tsunami, but there were other methods to kill a great number of innocents, and most would need barely a few months of preparations at worse. And he was sure the Enemy knew that.

“Which makes it all the more frightening,” Alastor’s next words were anything but reassuring, “that the bastards think they need fifteen days to accomplish whatever they have in mind...and their invitations of the Black Wizards and Witches to receive their marching orders.”

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“Have you heard in your Arithmancy class the term ‘Great Conjunction?’”

Fortunately, it had been a memorable lesson of Arithmancy, thank you Professor Vector.

“I don’t know about the ‘Great’, but the lesson we were taught about magical ‘Conjunctions’ explained it was about the manipulation of Ley Lines.” Alexandra hesitated. “Professor Vector used it as an example how horribly complicated Arithmancy calculations could get before a single magic-channelling spell could be cast.”

There was something however that their Arithmancy Professor had added...something which didn’t make any sense under the rules of the Fourth Task.

“But it doesn’t make any sense.”

“How so?” The amusement seemed genuine...well, better to have the Queen of the Exchequer amused than angry at you.

“One reason the Conjunction-type rituals and spells are so complicated is that you need to channel a lot of magical energy and then convert it into earth-aligned elemental magic. And for those wizards and witches who have lightning or water affinities,” and sadly this was true for her, “the magical conversion is less efficient and requires more calculations. And of course you simply can’t do something like that in the middle of a sea or an ocean. The Ley Line channelling and the Arithmancy calculations will be disrupted by the water...and no one has found a way to go around that rule. Most likely if you tried something like that in the middle of Venice...you would sunder the city under the waves.”

If anything, Morgane looked even more pleased.

“Very good, Alexandra, very good. And I can assure you...*Ra shares the same belief*.”

The accent given to the last words was not innocent.

And it could only mean one thing.

“You are doing what you intend in Venice itself *because* the Archmage of the Light is certain some of the rituals or magical deeds you’ve prepared are *impossible* here. You intend to have complete surprise on your side when...whatever you have in mind happens.”

An enigmatic expression appeared on the face of the ancient female vampire.

“Fate can usher miracles, but a great restraining factor is the intermediaries it can act through.” Somehow, the Potter Heiress didn’t believe it was a coincidence the Exchequer had chosen to strike while Longbottom was young and inexperienced. “And the ‘Great’ of the ‘Great Conjunction’ refers to the channelling of seven Ley Lines.”

“Are you sure Ra won’t suspect anything?” The Ravenclaw Champion couldn’t help but ask. *Seven* Ley Lines? That had to be a phenomenal amount of magic...

“As you remarked, the rules say no Conjunction can take place on the islands of Venice themselves...they are too small, and too far away from the continent and every Ley Line of note. The Archmage will be surprised, and won’t have a plan to counter us.”

Leaving him with only one solution: use the Grail...for which the Exchequer had likely a few contingencies to neutralise before any plague could decimate Europe and the rest of the world.

“Let’s say...let’s say you’re right. Why bother with such a ridiculously overcomplicated plan? Surprise or not, the Conjunctions are still ridiculously and horribly complicated magic. By the crows of the Goddess, the only reason Professor Vector mentioned it to us last year was *because* it is one of the most difficult calculi in Arithmancy class, and things can go wrong in mere seconds, causing impressive accidents. You have Lord and Lady-level magical practitioners in your ranks. Why put all your efforts and hopes in something that can result in the total destruction of Venice and every participant of the Tournament if events go not according to the plan?”

“Because the Statute of Secrecy has done too much damage to our world.”

Of all the answers Alexandra had thought Morgane would give, she had not expected *that*.

“The Statute’s executioners killed too many magical species which were the foundations of our world,” the Queen continued, seemingly lost in her thoughts. “Dragons are only the most obvious magical creatures to be shadows of their former glory; there were hundreds of others, and most are extinct now. The same was true for the magical plants. Afterwards, their great spell erased the traces of their crimes, but the reality is that the Light committed the greatest act of mass murder since Ra usurped what was never his to take millennia ago...” Morgane Rys’Ygraine vampiric eyes glared with hatred. “And they got away with it. The Army of Light, the Trinity, and all their friends...they stole magic itself, **and proclaimed it was Good**.”

Damn.

That made Dumbledore’s hypocrisy and crimes look like childish efforts by comparison. Perhaps the silver-bearded Headmaster of Hogwarts was a non-immortal descendant of Ra?

At least, it answered some of the questions she had. Listening to the hints hidden in the speech, the Exchequer intended to bring back some of the magic Ra had stolen away.

And Venice had to be one of the most improbable places to try, so that the Archmage would have zero suspicion until it was too late.

By the Morrigan, it had to be why they had exposed the two thrones that way during the Third Task. What better way to convince your enemy of his victory than to give him some credible threat to defeat, before moving on to some location where you couldn’t present a true challenge to his rule?

“This...this influx of magic...” seven Ley Lines, a complex ritual, and no doubt a majority of the Champions involved was going to cause an ‘influx’ all right, “it is going to change Venice and everything near it forever.”

And if Ra had stolen plenty of magic, no doubt a lot of it was Dark-aligned.

“Indeed. Some of my colleagues have taken to call it the ‘magical anchor of our Age’. Though others prefer the term ‘gateway’.”

“Fate will try to stop you at the end, no matter how many tricks you have in reserve and the effect of surprise shrouding your moves until the decisive hour.”

“True.” The undead sorceress didn’t seem to be worried by that, however. “We have worked very hard to ensure the deluded slaves of the Light and their arrogant master will be ignorant of our purposes, but the last Power can still ruin everything, despite being fuelled by ashes of its ancient might. That’s why there are plans ahead to break some tenets within the city’s boundaries.”

That was...very nebulous. Would they act against the Champion or directly against the Power? The green-eyed Champion abandoned the idea after a moment. There were simply too many possibilities.

“What do you want from me, Lady Morgane?” Alexandra Potter expressed her doubts out loud. “So far, aside from not interpreting the rules to my convenience, I haven’t heard any deed that requires my participation.”

“We want,” the long white teeth of the Vampiri Romani were bared, “the Night Court to **win**. There must be no stalemate, no mutual loss of the three Courts, and no saving face for our enemies. The Day Court must be utterly defeated, and the Conjunction must play out correctly at the moment of our choosing.”

That didn’t sound too bad...and the Hydra Animagus assumed they were aware of her views concerning the Statute...the Powers knew she hadn’t be exactly shy about mentioning them in public.

It left only one thing to ask.

“What’s the catch you think that, aside from my clever interpretation of the rules, will convince me to not go ahead with your plan if I think there’s a possible alternative?”

Surprisingly, it wasn’t the Queen who answered, but Lucrezia Sforza behind it.

“Like all powerful rituals and complex Arithmantic things, the energy drawn from Ley Lines and...other magical sources...won’t be enough. The Conjunction requires an unwilling Sacrifice.”

**8 January 1995, Milan, Italy**

The Fourth Task was over one month away; one couldn’t say it was going to begin tomorrow without being accused of outrageous exaggeration.

Yes, the Fourth Task was still weeks away...and Fleur Delacour already hated it.

Why?

Some part of her, the one who had been eager to shed the blood of the Champion of Death, was enraged that she was not the Queen of the Day Court. It was something that should have been hers by right. It was a duty and a privilege which was tailor-made for her abilities. Between her Veela Aura and her other magical talents, victory should have been only a question of ‘when’, not ‘if’.

Now that she had been heavily wounded, alas, participating was not something the blonde witch desired. Except Fleur had to. Her body had recovered from the damage the lightning magic had inflicted upon her flesh, and withdrawing would result not only in massive financial penalties...it would generate a reputation of cowardice too.

The French Champion didn’t think of herself as a coward. On the other hand, as it had made herself very clear to her, facing the green-eyed monster was as close to a death sentence as one could earn.

Fleur had survived twice, one easily, one in undying agony. There was no doubt that if there was a third, Alexandra Potter would make sure there would be no fourth duel.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t the worst part of being back among the Tournament Champions.

No, that dubious honour went to the oath she had made after a certain Champion of Chaos gave her Healers the ritual to restore her physically, mentally, and magically. At the time, it had seemed like a good idea. Three favours were agreed upon, and she wasn’t stuck on a hospital bed for the rest of her life? The conditions wouldn’t include anything about her family or any previous allegiance she has pledged herself to? That was a bargain anyone would sign to eyes closed, especially as the prospect of being a Champion again seemed inexistent.

Unfortunately, destiny and the European Tournament weren’t finished with her. Two favours had been paid, but the third she owed Loki’s pet psychopath was not.

The daughter of the French Minister didn’t know what the Dark Queen wanted, or when the favour would be demanded of her. But based on nothing but her bad feelings, Fleur could easily imagine it was going to happen at the worst moment possible during the Fourth Task.

Waiting and her imagination conjuring all sort of nightmarish scenarios, the half-Veela admitted only to herself, was in fact the worst part of the ‘favour’. The first two had come relatively quickly, and while dancing with gifts of the Tsar’s daughter was not something she relished, nothing unpleasant had happened besides frenetic whispers and shocked expressions.

With the third, one could easily resume she was to find herself be the target of a dark joke only a disciple of Loki would be able to find the humour of.

It was very unpleasant.

And none of it mattered when facing the group of five Champions that at the time being, was the entirety of the Day Court.

By all rights, if the First Task had not injured her and she had been among the top scorers, there would have been no question of her being among those five.

But she was injured; in fact Fleur had nearly lost her life, and despite this effort to kill the Champion of Death...neither the ‘King’ nor his ‘courtiers’ were in any hurry to offer her a seat.

“I don’t know,” this odious hypocrite of Frode Falk had the gall to sound sorry...something that completely failed as he smirked every time he thought no one was looking at him. “In my opinion, my King, Fleur Delacour isn’t very reliable. She went to the Winter Ball with the Dark Queen. Who knows where her true allegiance is, those days?”

This simple remark shouldn’t have hurt so much...but it did.

Years of loyal and dedicated service...but the first time she was near-death and her father told the truth, suddenly what had been ‘friends’ revealed themselves nothing of the sort.

“I have more practical concerns,” the older British Champion, the one looking like a playboy, intervened. “Can you tone down your aura of seduction in the middle of the Carnival’s parties? Because otherwise-“

“I can,” Fleur assured him. “Veela and Succubae decide when their Aura is active and when it isn’t.”

“So every time you flared up your power to make sure every male drooled and the women looked at you with murderous glares,” Lucas commented, “it was on purpose. Wow, you were really a bitch, weren’t you?”

“This isn’t-“

“Yes, yes, she was,” Henri affirmed before her protest had the time to gain any weight. “But we aren’t here today to criticise our fellow Champion’s questionable choices. Otherwise,” the expression the Champion of Horus gave Frode Falk was an extremely inimical one, “we would stay in this room until the next year, and possibly more. No, we’re here to decide if Champion Fleur Delacour is to be part of the Day Court...and that’s something the King has to decide.”

“Yes, thank you, Champion de Condé.” The daughter of Armand Delacour didn’t know if she had to be relieved or disappointed the ‘King’ was Neville Longbottom. On the one hand, he wasn’t Falk. On the other hand, he wasn’t exactly an impartial figure either...as the presence of the entire Court today confirmed. “Can you confirm you won’t let your vendetta against Alexandra Potter get in the way of the Day Court’s goals?”

“I can.” The last thing she wanted right now was to challenge the Morrigan’s favourite. The monster had almost killed her in duel. Statute or not, Fleur didn’t want to give her a new opportunity of finishing their enmity...and not just because she had sworn to her father she wouldn’t do something that stupid.

“Well, she’s lying!” And of course, the imbecile pledged to Frigg was there to spit his venom. “I say we must impose conditions before she pledges herself to her cause. Otherwise she will ruin everything.”

“You have no right to speak of ruin,” the half-Veela hotly retorted. By the Angels, this backstabbing ingrate had nearly murdered a Champion of the Light by his very hands!

The reaction, as justified as it was, was a mistake, Fleur acknowledged it.

Henri visibly disagreed, but Lucas Gauthier and Cedric Diggory were hardly fond of her, and their disgust for her behaviour were weighing more in their minds than their reluctance to work with Frode Falk.

And unfortunately, the ‘proud Day King’ was way too easy to influence.

There were several minutes of debate, but Fleur was the daughter of two politicians. For something so easy, it was child’s play to anticipate the outcome. Ultimately, the result was so clear that she doubted there could have been any other option, loss of her temper or not.

“Very well,” Neville Longbottom said, the *little boy* trying to sound important, and to her eyes, failing abysmally. The Champion of Fate had not the charisma, the power, or anything else to be the herald of their generation. Maybe in the future...but the future wouldn’t wait. “Champion Delacour, you will swear a magical vow before swearing yourself to the Day Court, the conditions are going to be determined in the next minutes. Is this acceptable?”

Fleur could see where the path led. Honestly, no one needed to be an Oracle or a bloody Seer to predict it.

It would be her death.

Ra would use the oath to force her to attack the Morrigan’s monster once again, and since fighting anywhere near water had not worked the last time, it likely wouldn’t work the third time either. And she would die, leaving her little sister alone.

Would there be enough of her to organise a burial? More likely not.

“I repeat, is this acceptable?”

“No.”

Plenty of gasps and expression of surprise followed.

Some part of her relished it, like she had half-enjoyed their surprise when she had arrived at the Winter Ball.

The rest of her mind wondered why they were so shocked. Eleonora da Riva had done it before, why not her?

A second later, Fleur realised she had said the last part aloud. Oops.

“Because Eleonora could be accepted by the killer worshipping Death!” Frode Falk was seething, all traces of amusement gone. “Would you try to guess what her answer will be, *Fleur*, when you will kneel before her? I wonder how many seconds it will take for her to smite you, insolent and ungrateful failure!”

“It’s *Champion Delacour* to you, backstabbing wastrel!” The Champion of Life retorted. “And I won’t have to imagine it.”

It was unpleasant to think about it... and no doubt the fifteen days of the Fourth Task were likely going to be the longest fifteen days of her life.

But it offered security in a way the Day Court wouldn’t provide.

“If the Day Court is as petty and hypocritical as to demand a magical vow and conditions we all know will be abused, then I refuse to be part of the Day Court.” Fleur Delacour smiled. “I am leaving. And you have no need to wonder where I’m going next. I’m told the Doge Court is recruiting, and I will Apparate straight away to meet their King. I would wish you good luck in your endeavours...but I am not that far drowning in my hypocrisy. *Adieu*.”

She had not made two steps after leaving the room that there was an avalanche of screams and insults.

Hmm...yes, not joining this band of disasters-in-being was really the smart thing to do.

**8 January 1995, somewhere in the Alps, Switzerland**

The moment they landed in the snow, both Morag and Alexandra burst into laughter.

“Did you see Malatesti’s face? Did you see his face?” Morag’s words were bordering on the hysterical, not that there was no reason for them to be.

“I did! He gaped like a goldfish! Should we call him that? The proud Doge Goldfish!”

“And Falk! He looked like he was ready to kill them all!”

“Don’t forget the proud Archmage! I could see the smoke coming out of his ears!”

The two Ravenclaw laughed again until their very ribs hurt and the rest of their body couldn’t bear it.

“Ah, hell,” Alexandra declared once she had stopped giggling. “I really needed that.”

Still, of all things she had expected to happen this morning at breakfast, Fleur Delacour pledging herself to the Doge Court was definitely not it.

“I’m sure you did.” Morag had to control herself not to chuckle...again. “This is going to cause problems, you know.”

“Of course, it will.” The Champion of Death replied in a less-than-happy tone. “The Army of Light is a band of fanatics, and their leader, according to the Queen of the Exchequer, is far worse than the most bigoted warmonger in their ranks. I was warned the activation of the Grail to wipe out the board was a serious possibility. Now that both Eleonora da Riva and Fleur Delacour have completely torn apart the Fourth Task’s scenario, it is not a question of ‘if’ but ‘when’.”

“Yeah. The Powers forbid the idea that pawns can decide by themselves.”

“Indeed. As satisfying as it was...” and it was *incredibly* satisfying, Alexandra wasn’t going to deny it, the image of Ra and his favourite acolytes reacting like they had been punched in the face was to be treasury as long as she lived, “the Veela hybrid doing the first intelligent thing in her life has just guaranteed that the Fourth Task is going to be a bloodbath.”

“What a reassuring idea,” the Irish Heiress shook her head before looking at around it. “Err...Alex? I knew we were going out for a walk, but why did you Apparate us in the middle of nowhere?”

“You don’t appreciate the spectacle?”

It was a fair question, in the green-eyed witch’s opinion. They were contemplating a fantastic spectacle of snow-covered mountains.

“Well...yes, but I also appreciate dearly my Warming Charms and my furred coat. Are we going to stay here for long?”

“No...just the time to locate...ha! There.”

A new teleportation, and their feet touched the valley below the peak where they had stood seconds ago.

“What are we supposed to look at? More snow?”

“No,” Alexandra smirked, before raising her hand and sending a small amount of magic which broke the weak illusion hiding...a large human-made tunnel.

More surprising were the railways half-hidden in the darkness. They were damn old. How long had this been since trains stopped coming here?

“Err...Alexandra, should we really enter? We don’t know who’s waiting in the shadows...”

“On the contrary, I know exactly what...or more accurately, *who* is waiting for us. Use your sense of smell, tigress.”

Alexandra stepped forwards, and a few seconds later, the information she had been given by Lucrezia Sforza was revealed to be exact.

Magical candles began to burn, not that the Potter Heiress really needed them, but the gesture was appreciated nonetheless.

“*Thorns and gates*,” the familiar rumble of wings unfurled and something massive moving echoed in the tunnel, “*you’re a very surprising human, Champion of Death*.”

Morag coughed next to her.

“Ah, Alexandra...is...err...”

“If you think, this is the Guardian of Jade, aka the dragon who was part of the Third Task, yes, you’re absolutely right.”

The ground shook, and the enormous jade-scaled Celestial Dragon was revealed.

In this tunnel – which was not small, but the presence of the ancient being made it seem tiny – the millennia-old retile looked even more imposing than he was in the throne room.

“*Have you brought more sugar*?” The incorrigible distant cousin of the crocodiles asked in a hopeful tone.

“Sorry,” Alexandra apologised, “for some Alchemical reagents were incredibly difficult to find after the Third Task-“

“Because I confiscated them,” a human voice announced in a stern tone. “Last time I happened, it took decades to stop his addiction. I was not going to let you corrupt him with sugar and other temptations, Sword of the Morrigan.”

It took a few heartbeats, but a human figure appeared next to the no-longer-proud Celestial Dragon. In fact, the Guardian of Jade looked oddly...submissive.

As the light inundated the tunnel, it didn’t take long for Morag and Alexandra to have a good view of the newcomer.

It was a witch. After a few seconds, Alexandra recognised her as one of the witches which were present at the Tournament Opening and the Winter Ball, yet were not part of the Judges or the members of the Exchequer not trying to disguise their true nature.

This had to be the mistress of the Guardian of Jade.

And Alexandra was instantly wary.

Appearance-wise, the witch looked like she couldn’t possibly be more than twenty-five. She was definitely of Chinese descent, and her long black hair were tied in a ponytail, yet they were so long they managed to be tied and yet descend and touch the jade-coloured belt she wore.

But her eyes weren’t human, there was a...very familiar dragon-familiarity in them.

And she was a warrior. Though her pale skin had no scars, Alexandra was very well aware the woman must have at least four pack abs under the tight black robe she wore, and you didn’t get a body like this without training seriously for it. Her face was noble but failed to show any joy. The nails of her hands were almost claws given how long they were.

Overall, there was something in this woman screaming war and violence...or maybe it was the monstrous Dark aura shrouding the witch?

Well, she had thought the mistress of a millennia-old dragon had to be powerful, a Knight of the Exchequer fit the required qualities...

“I suppose the presentations on our side are unnecessary, then.”

“They are.”

The Guardian of Jade chose this moment to groan and then placing himself in a position which needed no clarification.

“I am not going to rub your belly soon after your last scratching session,” the young-looking Dark Lady clicked her tongue with a frown.

“*But the Champion of Death will*,” the Jade Dragon replied peevishly, “*and I bet she’s far better at it too*!”

Alexandra sighed.

Were all dragons programmed to think humans were at their service to rub their belly and satisfy their little pleasures?

There was no need to answer the question; it was obviously a very rhetorical point...

A couple of minutes later, Alexandra had one brush in her hand, and Morag was pouring apple-smelling oil on the jade scales of the Celestial.

“*Ah...that’s the life*!” The great dragon rumbled happily. “*See Mulan? I told you she was far better than you at this noble art*!”

Alexandra froze.

“Mulan?”

The female Knight of the Exchequer gave her an innocent expression. For some reason, it failed completely to dissipate the aura of danger and darkness shrouding her.

“Oh, my mistake. I didn’t present myself. I am Mulan of the Hua.”

“But...that would mean you’re two thousand years old!” Morag exclaimed.

“I am,” the ancient witch acknowledged.

“The legends didn’t say anything about you being a mage.”

“Of course not,” this time there was a scoff in reaction, “the Mandarins of the human dynasties have always been good at removing the information they felt the people shouldn’t know. In fact, if I hadn’t beaten the nomads’ invasion almost by myself, I doubt they would have acknowledged my role at all. The Emperor and his sons had a lot of ideas what women should do, and I can assure you it wasn’t about leading men on the battlefield.”

The living legend cast a charm at her draconic subordinate, and the Guardian of Jade made a purr-like sound.

“I still had to kill the Emperor’s Heir and over one thousand of his so-called ‘elite’ when the inbred idiot decided my destiny was to be his concubine.”

How...how stupid did one have to be to propose that?

“I suppose they deserved it.” Alexandra replied. “You were already a Dragon Animagus by then?”

This was taking a minor risk, but the legend and the facts discovered so far supported it.

“I was.”

“And you’re the Knight General of the Exchequer.”

“No,” Mulan this time stared at her with a more intimidating expression. “I am Knight Summoner.”

Oh, by the fires of the Orodruin. Mount Doom and Mordor be cursed.

The witch they were mere centimetres away from was the one who had destroyed Brise-Roc despite not being present in person.

Alexandra shivered, and it wasn’t because of the cold of the mountains.

“What you did to the goblins...it was inhuman.”

The small shrug she received in turn was difficult to assess as approval or dismissal.

“I’ve been accused of worse, Sword of the Morrigan. Remember though that a lot of goblins will eventually betray you, no matter how many oaths you will force them to swear. And that in this Long War, we value free will. The Usurper of Fate does not.”

And the worst part was that it was definitely true from the point of view of a Dark witch. Since Ra offered nothing but a violent demise, possibly after a horrible session of torture, it wasn’t as if the choice was extremely difficult.

Time to change the subject, the Basilisk Slayer guessed.

“Is Nidhögg an Elder Dragon?” Her impression had been that he wasn’t, based on Lyudmila’s revelations and the writings she had found, but better to be sure.

“He is not,” Mulan said neutrally. “Otherwise Ra would have tolerated him to be imprisoned to serve as a magical heart for this ridiculously-named British school.”

“*He is not*,” the Guardian of Jade rumbled, “*but the gold smuggler is close*.”

“Close?”

“Once ‘Lesser Dragons’ are past a certain age and have grown formidably into their own magical skills, they can become Elder Dragons by a long and complicated process. This is how the sugar-addicted rascal here,” for once there was a shadow of a smile on the Chinese witch’s lips, “has increased his elemental magic manipulation skills way beyond the five elements of fire, metal, wood, earth, and water.”

“In that case,” Alexandra questioned in a low tone, “wouldn’t it be better for your Conjunction Plan to elevate your sugar-addicted ally here,” the next draconic rumble was a loud protest, “as an Elder Dragon? Once the Weir is active-“

“The Archmage will know no peace until my friend is dead,” Mulan affirmed in a voice that tolerated no hesitation or doubt. “And besides, while he is quite talented and the older dragon we have among our ranks...he is still a few centuries too young.”

Translation: we keep him as a long-term asset for the long-term future, but the Guardian of Jade won’t play more importance than he already did this year.

“And Nidhögg?”

“The Black Dragon being released would be good news, but he is at best an ally, not part of our organisation. Certainly he is a sworn enemy of the Light, but he also has his own agenda.” Mulan hummed a song in a language Alexandra didn’t recognise. “And ultimately, while he may have the potential, he is not, and the current plan can’t wait for him.”

Alexandra gave her back the brushes, and ignored the protestation of the jade-scaled reptile.

“Thank you for your honesty, Mulan of the Hua.”

“You are welcome, Apprentice of the Queen.”

Alexandra frowned.

“I have never said I would accept.” The Apprenticeship or the ‘Great Conjunction Plan’, she left unsaid.

“You have not...yet.”

There were no more words exchanged before they returned to the Scuola Regina.

**8 January 1995, Scuola Regina’s Library, Magical Republic of Venice**

Hermione hoped Alexandra was going to tone down her jokes, since in the last weeks, every time she tried to find her outside of the classroom, the answer always was ‘the library’ in the end.

“You didn’t stay for the entire Delacour affair,” the brown-haired witch told her friend...who barely raised her head from an enormous book.

“I had an intriguing meeting scheduled minutes after,” Alex replied absently. “Don’t worry, we got the basics. Malatesti gaped like a goldfish as Delacour sprung her surprise, the Light morons looked like someone had murdered their favourite puppy, and I laughed quite a bit with Morag.”

“Oh, so you missed Delacour slapping Falk when he accused her of ‘betraying the cause’.”

“Only a slap? Disappointing. If the backstabbing imbecile had tried that with me, I would have drawn my wand to teach him a lesson.”

“Fighting a Champion in front of half of the Judges doesn’t sound very smart,” Hermione pointed out.

“You’re right, it isn’t...but damn, it would be incredibly satisfying.”

That was a point you couldn’t argue with.

“Anyway, I didn’t come for that.”

“Would the motive behind your presence hide behind the shelves some twenty metres away? Your boyfriend is a talented Quidditch player, but he’s not exactly discreet, you know...”

The young Muggle-born witch huffed. If there was something frustrating about having a Hydra Animagus as a friend, it undoubtedly was the difficulty of surprising her.

“Yes. I mean, no. He’s not formally my boyfriend.” And she tried very hard not to blush.

“Ha! So you have moved from boyfriend-girlfriend to betrothed?”

Now she knew for sure the raven-haired Champion of House Ravenclaw was trying to grab secrets and gossip.

“No! I am saying we haven’t defined the terms of our relation...and it isn’t of any of your concern how we call it!”

“Liar,” the green eyes flashed at her like a spell, “you’re definitely boyfriend and girlfriend. Viktor won’t naysay me, don’t you Viktor?”

“Absolutely not!” The Bulgarian she had kissed plenty of times treacherously intervened as he arrived by her side. “She’s my girlfriend.”

“Good! Now as the most dangerous Champion of Hogwarts, I’m forced to give you the ‘big sister’ speech. If you break her heart, I will eat yours.”

“Alex!” Hermione uttered, mortified and blushing like a tomato.

“Consider me warned,” the Seeker replied with good humour, accenting the ‘r’ in a fantasist manner.

“Good to hear,” the book was closed violently and now the Durmstrang boy had her friend’s undivided attention. “But I presume you didn’t ask for a moment of my time to request my approval in your relationship?”

“No,” Viktor was far more serious now, “I wanted to know in private if you are willing to accept me as part of your Night Court.”

Hermione held her breath.

“Err...yes? Yes, of course, I thought I dropped enough hints to Hermione...” what? “Or perhaps not, given the astonished expression...and the glare...I am currently on the receiving end of.”

Alexandra was so going to receive a lecture once they were alone...

“Thank you,” Viktor bowed curtly. “You are aware, of course, that my greatest strength, flying, is going to be...difficult to use in a Statute-friendly environment?”

Alexandra...scoffed.

“But you have your second greatest strength, Mister the Professional Quidditch Player.”

Viktor raised an eyebrow.

“And this strength is?”

“You’re an athlete with no fear of heights. I mean, I am reasonably sure you don’t suffer from vertigo, you wouldn’t have gotten in the Bulgarian National Team if you were.”

“I do not fear heights, no...but...I am not going to jump on the roofs of Venetia without a good reason, Night Queen.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, I will give you a few...”

Hermione groaned. She was definitely going to have a lot of words for Alexandra this evening...

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After Hermione and Viktor left the library...no, the two were likely going to another library’s section to ensure she wouldn’t hear their kissing and all their tender marks of affection.

Anyway, they left, and Alexandra returned to her book. The history of pre-Statute Venice was absolutely fascinating, being a combination of thirty days-long Carnivals, deadly politics, grand magical contests where wizards and witches fought to determine who was the most powerful mage on the waves, and last but not least, audacious moves, be they military or diplomatic, to increase the trade going through Venice’s continental holdings and islands.

In fact, the motto ‘everything we do, we do in the name of trade’ seemed to describe nearly everything there was to know about the Venetians of the past...and their post-Statute magical descendants had not abandoned this tradition.

“You know,” an amused voice echoed, surprising the Hydra Animagus, for she had heard no one approaching, “the pre-Statute Magical Republic has few common points with the Muggle city where the Fourth Task will take place.”

Alexandra stopped reading and raised her eyes...and sure enough the Dark Queen was...what was the term? Ah yes, she was honouring her of her presence...

“I’m aware of this minor detail, Chaos. But there’s plenty of useful information nonetheless.”

“Really?

“Oh yes. Did you know that before the Light went to separate magical and non-magical worlds, the greatest families electing the Doge possessed enchanted keys as symbols of their impressive social status?”

The five seconds of silence proved she had definitely marked a point.

“No, I didn’t,” the female Champion of Loki admitted. “This isn’t a coincidence.”

Alexandra snorted loudly. There were few coincidences in this Tournament, and no one sane would believe that piece of information was one.

The two Dark Champions watched each other carefully.

“Recent events have been...very surprising,” the Dark Queen decided to take the initiative in the conversation again.

“Don’t tell me you are sorry, oh Champion of Chaos.” Alexandra sarcastically replied. “I will admit that I played a large part in ensuring Eleonora da Riva pledged herself to the Night Court, though the ultimate fault lies with Falk. But when it comes to Delacour, this kind of astonishing joke is your fault and no one else. You knew having her as dancing partner for the Winter Ball was going to spread chaos.”

“Guilty as charged,” Lyudmila Romanov smiled wolfishly, “but for the record, I didn’t predict what happened this morning. I had no idea, I swear it on the corpses of the Light fools I killed, that the Fourth Task was going to be this...this game of Courts and Carnival.”

“But you are hardly dissatisfied with the result.” The Basilisk Slayer said while giving her an ironic stare.

“I am extremely pleased with the result.” Alexandra groaned internally, because...yeah, who was she kidding? Of course a Champion of Chaos would find it even funnier than the rest of the Scuola Regina did. “You have not made a decision, didn’t you?”

The young Champion blinked at the brisk change of topic.

“If I think you speak about a critical matter-“

“I do.”

“Then no, I haven’t made a decision.” Alexandra hesitated, before deciding there wasn’t much of a risk to show her a few ‘cards’, so to speak. After all, the Dark Queen was not a friend of Ra. “But you can help. Tell me, do you have a method ready to neutralise the magical plagues of the Grail?”

The older Champion of Durmstrang was far less arrogant for a good thirty seconds...and quiet.

“I don’t.” The revelation seemed to cost her. “Of course, I will likely be fine. The third time the Light fossil unleashed one, the wizard who was the current Champion of Chaos survived, and his Animagus Form was far less powerful than mine, and I have...other protections. You are younger, but incredibly powerful. You have a high likelihood to survive. I wouldn’t be surprised if Sforza was able to fight back any disease coming out of the Grail.”

“But the rest of Venice and the world wouldn’t.”

“No,” Lyudmila shrugged. “There’s no true counter to the Grail when it is unleashed on the world.”

“One weapon was forged against Excalibur in the form of the sword I wield. And evidently, you found a way to beat Gungnir.”

The Dark Queen chuckled.

“As much as I want to boast about my exploits, Gungnir is a toy compared to the Grail and Excalibur. You might as well compare a novice entering Durmstrang for the first time and a teacher famed to have completed two or three Masteries in his lifetime.”

The blonde-haired Russian witch took a seat without invitation.

“And unfortunately, I didn’t really have a ‘counter’ against Gungnir. I just dropped an entire cliff of ice, stones, and snow on the head of the Champion of Odin.”

Alexandra tried to not look too impressed. She wasn’t sure if she was really successful.

“You killed the Champion of Odin...and stole Gungnir from his cold dead hands.”

“I had to cast a complex ritual and bathe the ‘holy spear’ into his blood...and that was a real chore, by the way. Do you know how long it takes to find a dead man in the middle of an avalanche, even without magic?”

Had someone told the Tsar’s Heiress that her priorities were weird? What was she thinking? Of course no one did...

“As for Excalibur, I admit forging a counter to it was an incredible feat.” For once, the Dark Queen appeared genuinely impressed which...well, Morgane was not the Queen of the Exchequer by mistake. “But she had an advantage a lot of wizards and witches lack. Access to Excalibur itself.”

Alexandra’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes...according to the legends, she was a hostage at the court of Camelot...”

“Precisely,” the Champion of Chaos nodded. “Obviously, touching the blade was impossible, and she couldn’t have stolen it without paying it of her life. But I’m ready to bet that even if she was not there for the creation ritual, the High Priestess of Death had some spies involved nearby...and she was likely able to pry some secrets from Merlin or one of the Court’s wizards.”

The Dark Queen’s teeth gritted momentarily, before returning to a more arrogant stance.

“I lack all those advantages, and I seriously doubt the old Light Fossil is going to make us a favour and give it to me for proper examination.”

“And that doesn’t concern you?”

“Of course, it does, Death...of course it does...but he still has to activate the Grail. It isn’t exactly as easy as ‘I click my fingers, and I unleash a plague for which there is no cure’. Otherwise he wouldn’t have done it so few times recently.”

“And those requirements are?”

“I have no idea,” Lyudmila retorted cheerfully, and Alexandra groaned. What had she expected, really?

One could say a lot of things about the Exchequer, but they were far more rational about their survival prospects than one Lyudmila Romanov...

“Your ignorance is noted. I suppose the next subject we must speak of is the Court.”

“No, we don’t.”

She wasn’t serious. She wasn’t...oh, who was she kidding?

In the heart of the Potter Heiress, stupefaction fought with relish.

“Since I don’t see you any time soon bend your knee to Neville and his Court of Light Champions, and they won’t accept you no matter how much blackmail you have on them...”

“I am going to ask Malatesti tomorrow,” if there was any doubt about it, the vicious smile of Lyudmila proved beyond doubt that she was the Champion of Loki.

The green-eyed Champion of the Morrigan sighed.

“You’re doing this to screw with Delacour, aren’t you?”

The grin Alexandra received in return had to be one which had preceded the fall of at least a couple of hundreds of kingdoms and duchies thorough history.

“Still, you will have to obey Malatesti.”

“Oh I will obey the orders of our mighty Doge...the great Champion of War will see his desires fulfilled...*exactly to the letter*.”

The Ravenclaw Champion didn’t envy Romeo Malatesti at all. It was...no, the Champion of Ares wasn’t going to last fifteen days with the Dark Queen doing her best to engineering an amusing death for him.

“How reassuring,” Alexandra scowled, “please give me the date of his demise, I will want to assist our poor Doge’s funerals...”

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

Ambre was inspecting the feathers of her great horned wall when Alexandra Potter entered the owlery.

While the female Champion of Beauxbatons feigned to ignore the presence of the Third Task’s victor – the Scuola Regina was in the middle of a park behind the school, and everyone had the right to be here to send or receive packages – Eugene was not of this opinion. The owl her parents had bought her for her twelfth birthday loved to impress the pretty female owls, and on the left shoulder of the British girl, there was a beautiful snowy owl.

Eugene hooted loudly, and Ambre de Courtois didn’t think it was necessary to be an Owl Animagus to decipher the meaning of that sound.

“No, you’re staying there,” there might not be a leash, but her fingers were around the neck of her great horned owl, and Eugene knew better than to disobey...not that he had any inclination to, given how the other Champion was walking straight towards her.

And predictably, the beautiful white-feathered owl hooted and strutted on her human’s shoulder like a queen demanding the attention of a suitor...fortunately, the scion of the de Courtois line had anticipated Eugene’s attempt to fly away from her enchanted leather glove.

“Why aren’t you taking the Magical Creatures’ class?” Ambre didn’t bother with the courtesies, it was obvious the younger Champion was here to meet her. “You would get first-tier grades, judging by the efforts made on your snowy owl’s feathers and health.”

Surprisingly, the aforementioned owl puffed up and hooted, pressing her head against the neck of her human mistress.

“Now I will have to give her treats,” the black-haired girl commented in French. The snowy owl hooted louder after hearing the ‘treat’ word. “And to answer your question, at least three times per week I return to Britain and I spend several hours caring about the animals I own in my magical guardian’s menagerie. Requesting a seat in the Magical Creature’s class would add plenty of hours to my already busy schedule, and I wouldn’t be able to do that anymore.”

“A pity,” Eugene hooted and tried a second time to fly away, leaving her no choice but to grab him in her arms and give him a hug which was soft and inviting...and reminded her great horned owl that if he continued this behaviour, there would be a punishment waiting for him. “But it’s perfectly understandable. Now that this matter is expedited, why did you choose the owlery to have this conversation?”

“Well, I didn’t choose the owlery *specifically*,” the mage some Venetians had taken to nickname the ‘Lightning Empress’ when she was nowhere nearby said, “but you’re not easy to find when I’m out of the classrooms and before you withdraw to your villa. And as for the reason of this conversation, I’m sure someone as smart as you are has a good idea. I want you to be part of the Night Court.”

The British girl was right; Ambre had anticipated something like that.

And to say she had her reservations was an understatement.

“After da Riva and Krum went to join your Court, you decided it was time to have someone from Beauxbatons just so you had spies from every school?” She asked to give herself a few seconds of reflexion.

The mistress of the snowy owl petted her white bird as she chuckled.

“Do not be offended, but I am a practical witch, and I have seen a lot of magic from every Champion save those who have just entered the Tournament. If I want to have an information advantage over the other Courts, I would have immediately tried to hire the Scuola Regina Champions. Unlike the rest of us, they have visited and sometimes lived in Venice those last years. You didn’t.”

That was...not a bad point.

“True.” And with Malatesti already the master of his own Court, so far Potter had gained one of the three remaining Champions. “But I could refuse. You are young, and so far all your tricks have been used in Tasks which didn’t last more than two hours in total. And of course the rules disfavour severely your Court.”

“Not arguing with each of the points you made,” the younger witch with bright green eyes countered, “but what alternative do you have? Untested for a long Task I may be, but do you prefer obeying Malatesti for fifteen days? His skills of ramming his head in the first obstacle blocking his way are kind of infamous, and...well, I suppose he has one empty slot for you, since he humiliated Lyudmila Romanov this morning.”

Ambre was forced to concede the future ‘Queen of the Night Court’ was right. Yes, Romeo Malatesti, who everyone by now knew as the Champion of War, was a selfish madman, and the idea to obey and be commanded by this bloodthirsty idiot was enough to give her nightmares.

“I...you are right. But that leaves the Day Court. They will have a numerical advantage in terms of Champions...and likely in agent-substitutes, or whatever we call our supporting forces.”

“Yes,” the British Champion agreed, “they will have.”

“Why then wouldn’t I try to pledge myself to the Day King? Unlike the Doge, he seems reasonable enough.”

“That’s kind of true, again,” the Third Task’s victor answered honestly. “Neville Longbottom had a dubious taste in pranks and other festive tricks, but he isn’t cruel. However, he doesn’t think before acting, and that has led to the result of the Day Court being influenced by *Falk*.”

Ambre grimaced hearing *that* name. When participating in the Tournament, the Beauxbatons pureblood had acknowledged she could die in the pursuit of gold and glory, and no, the Tri-Wizard Tournament had an awful history of treachery and disasters as long as it was organised.

But for all those low standards, what the Champion of Durmstrang had done was a new depth of malice, viciousness, and incompetence. And it had been executed in a few minutes; may Magic preserves all Champions when the Task was going to last fifteen days.

“It could be a unique situation.”

“Fleur Delacour thought it was best to find another Court once Falk had spread his venomous roots inside the Day Court.” The younger Champion went on to give a long petting to her snowy owl. “You believe Falk won’t try something viciously evil as much as I think Atalanta will refuse treats in a few hours.”

While it was phrased differently, this was more or less the same ideas Ambre had repeated herself in the last forty-eight hours.

“That’s...yes, you are right. If I join the Day Court, I will have to watch my back every minute of the Task...” something incredibly difficult, since Ambre believed herself to be a normal witch, and normal witches needed to sleep from time to time. “But you will need a great plan to win.”

“I have the beginning of one,” the Champion who was currently in the lead of the Tournament told her, “and you will help me refine it. According to some rumours, you have been dabbling in basic illusions?”

**10 January 1995, Alexandra’s Villa, Coliseum Valley, Magical Republic of Venice**

“You had the confirmation this afternoon Giovanni Ruspoli truly joined the Day Court,” the sound Alexandra made was kind of adorable. “And that Malatesti truly hoped to recruit the local Succubus for his...and he was violently rebuffed when he asked.”

“The last point was kind of predictable, really,” her girlfriend huffed, “seriously, what kind of idiot thinks that recruiting a Light Champion is a good idea when you have Dark Champions who hate the Light among the potential recruits?”

“You recruited a Light Champion too,” the Bones Heiress pointed out with a large smile.

“Yeah, but the Champion of Innocence isn’t infamous for her fanatical behaviour. Whereas Delacour was before the First Task, and I certainly wouldn’t try to bet on her future redemption when it’s my life at stake.”

The green-eyed Ravenclaw smirked.

“Our dear Champion of Ares really, really loves to live dangerously.”

“I thought that was obvious after what he did during the Second Task, Alex.”

A loud huff came out from her girlfriend’s throat.

“All right...all right. Well, the situation has simplified itself massively. Longbottom and the Day must recruit one more Champion. My own Court has two missing seats. And Malatesti has to find one more psychopath to add to his banner. To fill the vacancies, the Champions who have not yet chosen a side are Lucrezia Sforza, the dreaded Dark Queen, Yegor Poliakov of Confusion, and of course last and definitely least, Graham Montague.”

Susan shook her head.

“You knew it was always going to come this, in the end.” The red-haired Hufflepuff loudly clicked her tongue.

“Yes, Delacour and Da Riva were surprises for the Light, and Romanov was a half-trick of the Dark, but in the end, most of the Champions went with the Courts I predicted. The Champion of Loki received a harsh lesson yesterday...”

“Alex,” Susan hesitated, but decided after a couple of seconds her girlfriend needed to hear the truth. “It wasn’t just a lesson for the Dark Queen. It was a lesson the Exchequer intended for *you*.”

While she was hardly a veteran politician, Susan had received numerous lessons from her Aunt about this soul-corrupting subject...and since the Dark Lords and Ladies of the Exchequer weren’t novices, it was the only thing which made sense.

“I suppose it makes sense for them to value free will and symbolically accept the divide of the Courts as they are, but let’s face it: they could have rigged the choice of the Champions in a hundred different manners than the current roster we watched creating itself. No, if they accepted the Day and Night Court as they exist now, it is because they wanted it.”

“And why would they want something like that?” But her tone betrayed the fact Alexandra had likely already realised the answer...even if she didn’t want to admit it out loud.

“They want it,” Susan gave the athletic girl she loved kissing and cuddling, “because they want you, and by the you, I mean every Champion of the Dark, that when it really matters, when the rules are in favour of the Light, the non-Dark Champions will always choose the Day over the Night.”

Alexandra grimaced, but she didn’t make a sound.

“It doesn’t matter how gifted you are. It doesn’t matter if you are a skilled orator, a prodigy of the new generation, a ruthless killer, a wonderful friend, or some Dark Lady-in-being. The rules of the Fourth task are made to echo the harsh enforcement of the Statute, and the Statute’s implicit threat is that every rule-breaker is to be crushed mercilessly. The anti-Statute factions paid the price several centuries ago. So will the Dark if the Light has its way.”

Alexandra nodded curtly, once. And something dangerous brewed in her magnificent green eyes.

“The game is rigged in advance. The odds must always be worse, and mediocrity must rule the world order, because otherwise, people will begin to get *ideas*.”

“Yes.”

Alexandra’s expression was one of deep focus...and complete silence for several minutes.

And when she spoke again, there was determination...and resignation in her voice.

“You’re right, Susan. It was a harsh lesson, and I have to accept it.” The Champion of House Ravenclaw grimaced. “We can’t stop what is in motion. The Exchequer may not kill me, but they definitely won’t try to stop their plans if I ask. The Army of Light and all their murderous friends will definitely try to kill me, and their genocidal plans are ready to be implemented. And the only assets I have that can stop a big ritual would kill thousands, maybe tens of thousands...and it wouldn’t stop them.”

“The killing part, I completely understand,” the Bones Heiress commented, having no doubt Alexandra could definitely remove Venice from the map with the weapons she had at her disposal, “but not stopping them?”

“As the Queen reminded me, there’s a reason our dear hosts have planned this during the Fourth Task,” was the absolutely not reassuring retort, “assuming by that a succession of miracles we managed to wreck the plans of the Light and the Dark and preserve the status quo when the Carnival ends...there will be three more Tasks left to complete. The Queen of the Exchequer told me they had contingencies, and it didn’t sound like a bluff.”

This was kind of sobering...and terrifying. If the hints they had given Alexandra were true – and Susan had shivered because they were all too likely possible if the earth-water Conjunction synergy issue was solved – this would be the largest ritual made since the Statute. Knowing some substitutes and new plans were prepared to be worthwhile replacements if it failed...it was extraordinarily...frightening.

“What is your decision, then?”

Alexandra smiled.

“Will you follow me into the darkness, my dear Lady?”

“I will...I will, my love.”

This shouldn’t have been how their innocence died...but it was.

Of course, after that, they were in need of comfort, and quickly their lips were against each other.

Then the thunderous melody announcing they had a visitor echoed through the villa, and Atalanta went to add her own hoots to it.

“Morrigan and her crows,” the Champion of Death reluctantly stopped their embrace and rushed towards the entrance. Susan followed...just in time to see her open the door...and freeze.

“We apologise for the late hour, but we wanted to speak with you.”

Of all things she hadn’t expected tonight, Susan thought, the Succubus of Desire and the Dark Queen waiting together on the villa’s doorstep had to be near the top of the list...

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After a few months, her villa had been the scene of plenty of unconventional meetings.

Tonight was definitely setting a new standard, though.

Having Susan on the seat directly to her right was not unprecedented.

Having Lyudmila Romanov and Lucrezia Sforza several metres away from her, on seats directly facing each other, was this kind of fascinating event you wanted someone else to deal with.

Alas, they had not decided to visit another villa tonight.

“Since we’ve spent enough time on the weather and complimenting each other’s villas, mind telling me why the two of you decided to visit at such a late hour?”

“Well,” Lucrezia smirked, “we didn’t decide to visit together. I was just-“

“She was likely spying me, and the moment it was obvious I was going in the direction of your villa, Lust decided to intercept me before you could open the door,” the Dark Queen interrupted viciously.

“What violent accusations,” the Succubus did not seem to manifest any contrariety at the interruption. “One might wonder if you have enough to prove them.”

“I don’t need to...not when you’ve been so eager to slap Malatesti and run here to behave like a good submissive pet.”

“Those are big words from someone who desired serving under the Champion of War and was rebuffed like a dog lacking affection.”

“Listen here-“

“Stop.”

Alexandra ordered.

Near miraculously, the two Dark Champions temporarily ceased their vocal squabble. The Potter Heiress had the foreboding feeling it was just in time; purple sparks were shrouding the Russian witch’s fingers, and some pink-red power had begun to coalesce behind Lucrezia’s head.

“You’ve made it pretty clear you two aren’t friends, and probably never will be. Now, it is late, we all had a long day, so we’re going to skip the ‘I’m more powerful than you’ and the ‘I took better decisions than you’ parts, and go directly to the one where you tell me what you want. And without interrupting each other, please. Lust, you go first.”

“I want to be part of the Night Court.” Lucrezia shrugged. “I always wanted to be part of it...as Queen or as an important advisor. And evidently, in the last days my Queen and my mother were particularly...insistent I had to be by your side, Death.”

Alexandra nodded. Asking if it was as an advisor, a spy, or some other unconventional jobs – if it wasn’t ‘all of the above’ – would be a tad undiplomatic.

“Chaos?”

“As my fellow Champion remarked, Malatesti ruined my plan by refusing my pledge for the Doge Court. So yes, I want be part of your Court, Death.”

Alexandra frowned, all the while Susan chose this moment to pass a hand in her hair.

“You could try again your luck with Malatesti, now that Lucrezia slapped him.”

“I have my pride.” The Tsar’s daughter growled. “Maybe if he had been...chivalrous...I would have accepted a ‘no, but’ for the indirect tactic it was. However, he insulted me, and I swear he is going to pay dearly for the insults he had the temerity to voice.”

Yeah, the Champion of Ares had never been noted for his cleverness, but...for his sake, Alexandra hoped he had an excellent set of plans to survive February. Something told her the Venetian wizard was going to face a few deathly situations.

“And it goes without saying I am not going to choose the Day Court. The bumbling backstabber who whispers in the Day King’s ears is a coward, but I am not going to let him get close to me without retaliating magically and physically.”

And given the actions of Falk, this speech was just common sense.

“Okay, I understand.” Alexandra clicked her tongue in frustration. “But I think you will understand why, despite having two empty seats among my Court, I am extremely reluctant to accept the two of you together in my Court.”

“You don’t exactly have many alternatives,” the Dark Queen immediately pointed out in a mischievous manner. “You can’t exactly afford to lose many Champions during the Tournament, and what is left by now? Poliakov and Montague? The eternally drunk and sickening Champion of Corruption...or the ‘Zero Points and Bumbling Fool’?”

For a terrifying psychopath, the witch of House Romanov had a gift to describe other Champions with devastating precision.

On the other hand...

“Those two are probably idiots, yes.” Well, the former was so often drunk it was a bit difficult to investigate if he was competent or not. That the Fourth Task would be his first was not helping matters.

“In the case of your school champion, there’s no ‘probably’,” Lyudmila said ironically.

Alexandra breathed out...before transfiguring her eyes into her Animagus form’s.

“But at least with those two, I am rather certain I can terrify them into submission.” The Champion of the Morrigan continued in a cold voice. “With the two of you, I am confident...that I can’t threaten you. Lust, because she is powerful and whose organisation she is part of...and Chaos, because you are simply too powerful.”

Lyudmila Romanov smiled wolfishly...a bit too prematurely in her opinion.

“Let’s be blunt and honest: right at this moment, I’m in the mind to accept Lucrezia’s pledge.” One Champion evidently looked very pleased, and the other not at all. “Unlike you, Chaos, I know she is going to control herself, since her Headmistress will throw her into the crocodile pit if she screws up what they want us to do.”

“You’re not wrong here,” the young Succubus muttered as her hair turned from blonde to a red so dark it could be called a dark sunset. “Based on your words, may I assume you intend to answer the Queen’s request positively?”

Alexandra stared in the eyes of the Champion of Lust for long seconds. Then she turned towards Susan. Who nodded with determination.

“I do.”

“Please you’re not serious!”

Oh yeah, she still had to deal with Lyudmila Romanov.

“And why wouldn’t I be serious, Chaos?” This was obviously a rhetorical question, and she didn’t leave enough seconds for the Dark Queen to answer. “The Exchequer told me they had plenty of contingencies to neutralise or outright nullify the most dangerous Light relics ever created. You, on the other hand, did tell me you had nothing to save my friends if the artefact was activated.”

“Yes...” Lyudmila growled. “But it isn’t...it isn’t certain the Light fossil will use the Grail. He would need to be incredibly desperate-”

“On the eve of each Ragnarok,” Lucrezia murmured, “Ra’s despair reaches new heights.”

“Fine,” the Fenrir Animagus said grudgingly. “You want to protect your powerbase. I get that.” Alexandra had wondered if Loki’s Champion really cared about Astrid and the other witches she paid to research magical information and other services. Before the Tournament, her guess would have been ‘no’. Now? It was ‘maybe’. “But you don’t need to have Lust pledged to your Court. Otherwise they would have forced you to accept her several days ago.”

“You’re right about that,” the wolfish grin was back, but not for long, “but I am, as my girlfriend reminded me yesterday and tonight again, often brutally pragmatic. Since the rules of the Fourth Task are against me, I want everything else in my favour. I could add that I don’t want to continuously wonder if the Queen is displeased at my...creative interpretations of the rules, and this wouldn’t be a lie. But that’s only part of the truth. The reality is, I don’t know Venice at all. I have seen the Piazza San Marco, visited a few museums, and sampled the delicious Venetian food.”

The Champion of House Ravenclaw snorted.

“I am not stupid enough to pretend that translates in knowing Venice at all.”

Staring at the chaotic green eyes of Lyudmila, the silent question was evident. Can you be my guide for the next month? Can you tell me the secret passages and everything I need to know in time to do any good?

Can you be the alternative to Lucrezia Sforza I need?

“Yes...” the growl was far less threatening. “But she isn’t loyal to you personally.”

Alexandra stared at Lyudmila. Lyudmila stared at her. Finally, all four witches present into the room burst into uncontrollable for...well, for a good minute, maybe more.

“Seriously, you’re out of good arguments, right?”

“You don’t know what she will bring to the table.”

“Lucrezia?”

“While everyone knows where our palace, the Ca’Sforza, is, House Sforza owns covertly an impressive number of apartments, be they luxury-level or modest ones, and no one of the Army of the Light has any idea of their numbers and locations. Several hotels and restaurants belong to my family. We have plenty of hidden caches in the authentic shops spread out across the different islands...and that includes locations where one can prepare, hide, and repair the Carnival costumes.”

The way the Champion of Chaos grimaced, obviously she couldn’t boast of anything about that.

“That alone would be great assets.” Alexandra acknowledged. Evidently, they had likely been prepared for Lucrezia or someone of complete Exchequer allegiance to be the Queen of the Night...but if they were allowed to use them, the Fourth Task’s unfair rapport of strength may not be so unfair at all. “Any other advantages?”

“Plenty,” the Succubus smiled, “but you understand I am not going to reveal them when, for all I know, the Champion in front of me will not be part of the Night Court.”

The Dark Queen grunted, and it wasn’t a sound of joy.

“If you hope I can give you something of equal value, don’t. This is not where I thrive.”

Alexandra felt Susan place her hands on her shoulders.

The whisper ‘pride’ was for her ears alone...though with the Animagi in the room, one couldn’t be sure.

Yeah, the pride of the Dark Queen was so strong she wasn’t going to play the seducer or the miracle-solver.

And to say the truth, Alexandra was really tempted to let Romeo Malatesti have her.

The Durmstrang Queen wasn’t Falk, but she was the Champion of Chaos for a reason. What would happen if at the worst moment possible, she thought the big explosion of a failed ritual would be way funnier?

But.

Because there would have to be a ‘but’, in the end, right?

But if she let Romeo Malatesti and Lyudmila Romanov be part of the same Court, the big question wasn’t if Venice was going to burn during this Carnival, it would be how quickly it would happen. The two couldn’t stand each other, and the less said about Delacour’s presence, the better.

Worse, the Fourth Task was going to be fifteen days-long. It was likely that during all that time, the Tsar’s daughter’s resentment would reach new levels of hatred, against anyone who had contributed to place her under the orders of Ares’ warmongering thug.

And for all her lack of subtlety during the three previous Tasks, Alexandra knew in the depths of her soul that Lyudmila Romanov was an epically dangerous opponent. Avoiding her for ten minutes during a Task was a complicated affair. Avoiding her for fifteen days? Even the Light and Dark Powers working together may not be able to succeed...

“Are you willing to follow my orders and work to the victory of the Night Court?” Alexandra asked. “I’m really serious here, Chaos. If you intend to play the part of the internal saboteur who constantly misreads the commands and screws up every attempt to gain an advantage over the other Champions-“

“I won’t. I will work with you, in the name of the Light’s annihilation.”

Lucrezia raised both eyebrows with a very skeptical expression.

“Oaths aren’t working on a Champion of Loki, so do you expect us-“

The next words were uttered in a language Alexandra didn’t understand the first word of.

It didn’t sound like anything she’d ever heard...and yes, she included the Russian and Bulgarian words Hermione had learned in the last weeks.

For the first time since they had entered her villa, the daughter of the Scuola Regina’s Headmistress let her surprise show.

“You’re really willing to let-“

“You heard correctly,” Lyudmila growled. “I won’t repeat myself.”

And she crossed her arms in a defiant posture.

The Champion of Lust returned to her blonde-haired, blue-eyed body before addressing the Potter Heiress again.

“While I can’t read her thoughts, if she is willing to do what she told me, then she will follow your orders for the Fourth Task.”

“And likely not a second more, I presume.” Alexandra sarcastically added.

“You assume correctly,” the Dark Queen replied, though this time there the predatory expression was half-way back as she turned her head towards her. “My Queen.”

Damn.

The jokes of Morag, Fred, George, and everyone else following the Fourth Task had been bad, but the Ravenclaw Champion could already feel it was just an appetizer compared to what the Dark Queen could unleash.

“I am NOT eagerly waiting for your undying loyalty,” Alexandra commented before asking what she hoped to be the last question of this nightly conversation. “Where do you want to voice your pledges to the Night Court?”

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

Neville had a problem.

No, that was untrue. He had a lot of problems.

The Boy-Who-Lived was doing his best to avoid Frode Falk most of the time he wasn’t in a classroom, because the ideas of the Durmstrang Champion, not content to be outright *murderous*, were completely impractical.

Yeah, there were rituals where sacrificing a white elephant in a grand ritual resulted in prodigious and devastating magical effects. And somehow the Light Champion of Wisdom was going to transport something as massive as an elephant in the crowded streets of Venice. Without violating the Statute of Secrecy. Without alerting the other Courts of their intentions.

Neville had been so surprised by the proposal that he had immediately asked Fred and George if they had sold Falk some nasty pranking drink as a revenge for the Third Task.

To his disappointment, the Terrible Twins had admitted that they had not...but it was an excellent idea, thank you very much.

“Hey, Neville!” to his relief, it was Cedric who had just called him as he descended some stairs of dark-veined marble on his way to lunch.

“Hey, Cedric,” the Gryffindor Champion tried to muster as much enthusiasm as he could, and it wasn’t a lot. “The morning was good?”

“The classes were good, got a good grade in Transfiguration,” the Hufflepuff smiled for a couple of seconds before taking a more serious expression. “Unfortunately, I was intercepted by Montague a few minutes ago too. He wanted to know when you were going to invite him to be part of the Day Court.”

“If the Tournament wasn’t...a lethal Tournament where we can definitely be killed, I would say ‘over my dead body,” the King of the Day Court replied after making a large grimace. “Couldn’t he try to go pledge his wand to Potter or Malatesti? Surely a Junior Death Eater would learn a lot of stuff his parents and allies didn’t teach him...”

“I don’t know about the Scuola Regina duck,” Cedric’s joke assuredly managed to lighten the atmosphere, “but I know he tried with Potter this morning. It was quite early, so there were not a lot of witnesses, but...well, it didn’t go well.”

“She told him there was a standard to be part of the Night Court?” Neville’s curiosity was teased, all right. And the Black Witch of Death had quite a venomous tongue when she wanted to use it.

“Err...more or less?” The tall and handsome Champion of Hufflepuff whistled. “Err...let’s just say that there were inappropriate comments about how some parts of his genealogical tree had copulated with things inferior to animals, because at least animals, it was proved beyond doubt, had some survival instincts worthy to be remembered.”

Neville winced.

“Yeah, that sounds like Potter when she’s angry...I suppose the last words were a direct quote?”

“You suppose correctly.”

“But the most interesting thing, was that once she had finished insulting him, was that soon, our dear ‘Night Queen’ promised, her Night Court was going to be full before the day was over, and as such there was no additional spots for failures.”

“Ouch,” Neville commented, “Montague must have really wanted to murder her.” Not that there was a big risk of it happening. The chances of Mister Zero, as plenty of students had nicknamed him or given him the equivalent name in their own languages, to win a duel or ambush successfully the Basilisk Slayer were so low even Fred or George wouldn’t have the audacity to organise a gambling event upon it.

Then his mind caught up to the real implications of what had been said.

“Wait a second...yesterday night, she was missing two Champions. She had da Riva, Krum, and de Courtois.” At least since someone pledged himself or herself openly in front of the Judges, there was no risk of asking someone who was already part of another Court.

“Yes, but that was yesterday.” Cedric had a gift for saying the obvious... “And if Montague wasn’t one of the Champions she made a pact with...”

“It’s certainly Poliakov and Sforza.”

“You think?”

“Yes,” Neville did his best to not sound too worried, “I mean, the Succubus smacked Malatesti around, and everyone knows how Sforza tried to seduce her during the Second Task. And Professor Dumbledore and everyone we asked confirmed House Sforza has purchased a giga-enormous palace in the middle of Venice in the last century, right?”

“Right.”

“Thus I think Potter will want Sforza on her side, even if she’s a spy of the Avatar of Darkness. And Poliakov is someone she can pulverise if he tries to go against her, so that will give her another Dark soul for the Night Court.”

“And what about the Dark Queen herself?” Cedric wondered, not telling him if he believed his assumption was something he believed into.

“Sforza and the Durmstrang monster aren’t exactly friends,” the Boy-Who-Lived shrugged, using some of the recent knowledge he had found in old Light libraries, “and Triumvirates of the Dark never last long. Fifteen days? They would kill each other and we wouldn’t have to lift a finger to-“

Neville forgot what he had been able to say, for suddenly, the torrent of students multiplied by ten...and the reason was not difficult to find out.

On the other side of the hall, barring the way to the hall where they were supposed to go eating their lunch, Lucrezia Sforza and Lyudmila Romanov were bending the knee in front of Alexandra Potter.

And it was evidently not a decision taken hastily.

The Succubus had chosen an unmasked Carnival costume of silver and black for the occasion, while the Fenrir Animagus was in an equally sumptuous and ornate purple costume.

“I, Champion Alexandra Potter, am happy to welcome you among the ranks of the Night Court, Champion Lucrezia Sforza, Champion Lyudmila Romanov.”

There were plenty of cheers and students fiercely clapping their hands at this very momentous event. Neville wasn’t one of them; he was too busy gaping and trying to assimilate the news.

“Well,” Cedric whispered next to him, “I really hope your theory is right and that they will spend most of their preparation time bickering and fighting each other.”

“So am I, so am I...” Still, the situation was in their favour. “Don’t forget that everything will take place in a crowded city with thousands of participants. They won’t be able to use the spells and the Runic casting we saw during the First and Second Tasks.”

“Hmm...” Neville didn’t like that kind of reaction from Cedric. “At least it simplified your problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Montague or Poliakov?”

Neville groaned loudly.

**Author’s note**:

And that will all be all for this chapter, dear readers.

Yes, I know, the Courts’ recruitment isn’t formally over...but the chapter is already sufficiently big, I think, and there must be some mystery left for a good cliffhanger, right?