**Chapter 100**

**Last Enigmas**

**16 January 1995, Ca'Sforza Palace, Venice**

"The Judges are sadists, and we are their victims."

The Champion of Lust only raised an eyebrow at her declaration.

"I don't disagree, Alexandra, but may I ask for what reason you are angry at our malicious Tournament Overseers today?"

The Champion of Ravenclaw huffed.

"I am not angry. I am...considerably frustrated." The green-eyed witch nodded to Morag, who opened the large wooden box that had been brought to Ca'Sforza by boat after being on the receiving end of plenty of Charms to not attract undue attention.

It took quite a few second for the security measures to be deactivated, but once it was done, the 'Tournament Lion' was revealed in all its glory in the middle of the Sforza garden. The Glass Enchanters of Murano had surpassed themselves. Their glass-made lion appeared ready to roar and walk on its own, and with the different shades of crystal, including white, gold, and ruby, the entire artwork was shining like a mythical animal straight out of a book about fantastic and long-extinct magical creatures.

"Quite beautiful," Lucrezia Sforza conceded after a heartbeat, which, from a Succubus living in one of the most exquisitely-decorated palaces of Venice, was saying something. "Where was it?"

"That's the frustrating part," Alexandra grimaced. "It was in a magical shop selling enchanted glass creations, not far from the Arsenal. I must have walked in front of it ten times in the last week alone."

Judging by the expression of the Scuola Regina Champion, she too must have walked next to it in the last days.

"The Judges are sadists," the currently blonde-haired Succubus acknowledged. "How did you find it, since it was very much a place no one among the Night Court thought to investigate?"

"Krum's idea led us to the Enchanters of Murano who created the Crystal Lion," Alexandra answered. "And then in turn this gave me the idea to investigate the lighthouse of the island. There we found coordinates and a new enigma which led us directly to this Venetian magical shop. Fortunately, we were fast enough to reach the shop a few minutes before it closed. Otherwise...well, we would have had to wait until tomorrow, I suppose."

"And a delay of twenty-four hours to get such a prize is really damning," the Succubus said without a hint of mockery.

"It is beautiful, don't get me wrong, but where coherency is at stake, I won't exactly say the different 'rewards' support each other." Alexandra counted on her fingers. "First, there was the Emerald Necklace. Then there was the Ceryneian Hind. After it came the Egg of Cleopatra, and now the Crystal Lion. Roman, Greek, Egyptian and Venetian styles...I'm not complaining, but it isn't exactly a well-coordinated series of rewards."

"All depends on how you present them." The Succubus blonde smiled before advancing until she was a couple of fingers away from touching the leonine creation. "Let's see what we have here...you said the orb between the paws was certainly the clue, correct?"

"Correct," the Ravenclaw Champion nodded, "there were a few obscure Charms on it I am unfamiliar with, I thought it would be better to wait until the Crystal Lion was transported here before dispelling them."

"A prudent course of action," the Venetian Champion approved before shaking her head, "though in this case, the prudence was more warranted by the possibility of the two other Courts' spies acquiring critical information about the location of the Tournament Clue. The protections are old, but not dangerous."

Three words in Italian were uttered, and the orb the Crystal Lion was holding between its paws transformed from a pale and perfect golden crystal orb to a similar-sized ball...where a miniature map of the Venetian lagoon was carved.

"I see."

In terms of laconic comments, this was certainly a good one. Alexandra raised her eyebrows.

"Good news, I hope?"

"The island where the Judges have hidden the final clue for the Fourth Task is the *Isola di San Michele*, San Michele's Island for your English ears," Lucrezia Sforza affirmed. "I think you must have had a good view of it if the weather wasn't too bad during your sea travel to Murano."

The Potter Heiress frowned. There hadn't been that many islands between Venice and Murano, for all that it was a vast lagoon with plenty of memorable locations. There had been-

"The cemetery," the Champion of the Morrigan spoke after sighing deeply. "It's the cemetery-island of Venice, isn't it?"

Lucrezia gave her a smile of apology. Morag behind her was far louder. The red-haired Ravenclaw chuckled...a lot.

"'No Champion will want to rest here'...that part of the enigma was to take literally, Alex."

The black-haired witch winced. As always, once you had all the information at your disposal, hindsight was really a vicious and annoying thing.

"Okay, we know where the clue is. The Island of San Michele is our next destination. Any possibility we can use a ferry to begin the search today?"

"I don't think so," their Succubus host said slowly. "You could technically catch a ferry for the island, though at this hour, I wouldn't bet my gold on it. But the cemetery must be closed now. And since it is quite a large area to search for, I don't think one or two Champions will be really efficient in a place you don't know to begin with. In my opinion, it would be best for you to wait until tomorrow and move there with several other volunteers of the Night Court."

"Hmm...you're right." Besides, the January nights were really cold. Even if they found what the Judges had hidden, it would hardly be a very enjoyable experience. "We will organise something tomorrow. Anything particularly interesting happen while we were away? Or rather...anything that was particularly interesting and that can't wait for tomorrow morning and our next Court meeting?"

"Yes, I believe there's something you need to see." Lucrezia Sforza looked at a superb watch where many diamonds had been inserted magically. "Eleonora should have finished her part. Follow me, please."

Morag and Alexandra were not escorted to the glass stairs this time, or any part of Ca'Sforza they'd already visited. No, this time, they left the gardens by another tunnel they'd never noticed before, and rapidly could admire some oriental carpets before great doors of gold opened.

And then...Alexandra had to fight not to let her jaw drop, because they arrived in a vast atelier where what felt like an army worth of costumes were carefully awaiting inspection. Many looked like they had already been used, the advertising signs proclaiming each had won a certain prize in a certain Carnival years or decades ago, but each looked *unique*.

There was...there was every costume one could dream of, and far more besides. From the famous – or infamous – attires of plague doctors to the costumes of musicians and old men, everything was there when it came to the favourites of the Comedia dell'arte. But they were just the beginning. House Sforza clearly believed in the classics, but they also invented new modern fashions. There were costumes of Roman Legionnaires, adapted for the Venetian winter weather. There were disguises which were clearly intended to represent witches as per the non-magical legends. There were seventeenth century ball gowns and realistic clothes, including turban and exotic feathers, to pass yourself as an oriental despot.

Alexandra could have watched this formidable and immobile parade of Carnival costumes and masks for hours...if Lucrezia had not continued to advance and then revealed to them a small alcove where Eleonora was clearly working on...

"No..." this time the Champion of Death honestly giggled. "No, you didn't dare."

"Oh, shut up, Death," the growl came immediately, proving she was not, at least, dealing with an impostor. "Or I will-"

Morag began to laugh hysterically. And Alexandra knew her self-control was not far from losing the battle too.

"Come on, it's..." what to say before this multicoloured and tight costume hugging each and every curve the Russian Champion possessed? "It's...It's Arlecchina!"

It was the comical character of the Comedia dell'arte by excellence. Joyous, trickster, glutton, convivial...a *bon vivant*, like the French were saying.

"Exactly," Eleonora said in a smug tone as she turned towards them. "If our dear Dark Queen plays her role correctly, no one will ever think it is possible she is using this costume."

Well, there was some truth to that. Alexandra looked at the funny, charming multi-coloured mask waiting on a chair nearby...and began to laugh as she imagined what Lyudmila Romanov would look like once the costume was entirely donned.

"I want it to be clear," the Fenrir Animagus growled threateningly, "that it is to be my thirteenth costume! I will never wear it unless the other twelve costumes have been exposed!"

This statement could have sounded very dangerous, but Eleonora just cast a voice-distorting charm at that moment, and as a result the sentence which came out was literally one born to play the comedy.

Alexandra looked at the dozens of colours, the tight costume – which had to be enchanted to be warm, otherwise the user would freeze in mere hours when the Carnival began. It was honestly...a costume which gave a strong vibe of buffoonery.

And for all she didn't know what awaited her in terms of costume...Alexandra exploded in laughter.

"I will kill you all."

From Lucrezia Sforza to Morag, everyone laughed hysterically louder.

**17 January 1995, Island of San Michele, Venetian Lagoon**

"I don't like this island."

Susan stared back like she had grown a second head.

"Alex, at the risk of saying the obvious...you're the Champion of Death. And we're in a cemetery."

"Thank you, Susan, I would never have guessed." The green-eyed Ravenclaw answered sarcastically. "I mean, I can sometimes be lost in my thoughts, but I think I did notice there was a great deal of silence suddenly..."

"You're not funny."

Alexandra snorted and gave her girlfriend an unamused glance.

"Jokes aside, you will notice I said 'I don't like the island', not 'I don't like the cemetery'."

"There's not a lot save the cemetery," the Hufflepuff redhead replied. "Aside from the graves and the crypts, there are...err..."

"The churches, yes. This island has a few churches, and believe me, they weren't built by Champions of the Dark."

"You must have a far stronger sensibility than I, then," Susan replied seriously. "Even when we were next to it, I barely felt anything."

"You didn't?" Susan shook her head. "Interesting..."

"Interesting in what way?"

"Well, as a young witch gifted in the Necromantic Art, you would have felt if a Light Champion or one of the lackeys of the Archmage had cast a Life-empowered Ritual on this island. Yet the strong aversion I feel is definitely...hostile to Death."

In fact, the more she stayed in this cemetery, the more Alexandra was certain there was something in the air and the stones that was pressing her to get out of this island and never come back.

"In a way, that makes sense." Susan paused. "Casting a ritual empowered by Life would be extremely hypocritical...and stupid. The people who arrived and are still arriving these days are dead. Life can't do anything for them. But if you want the dead to stay dead, you don't cast a ritual where Life is involved. Your call is to-"

"Order." Alexandra finished. "Of course. If that's the case, the Dark Queen is going to be the worst affected of all the Champions we came here with."

Something that was verified a few minutes later when the members of the Night Court who had had their schedule free to participate in the hunt for the clue gathered at the agreed meeting point.

Lyudmila Romanov...the Champion of Durmstrang did not look on death's door, far from it, but she looked she was a few moments away from vomiting.

"Who cast those rituals?" Loki's Champion was not in a good mood, unsurprisingly. "If they're still alive, I will gut them!"

"The ritual creators themselves are long dead," Lucrezia Sforza inspected her nails, "They've been buried in the church of San Michele for centuries. Their teacher is not dead, unfortunately."

"Ra," Alexandra cursed. One name, one man, one Avatar...and though the purpose of the dead staying dead was good in most circumstances, feeling the ill-tasting power of the Light in a place of Death gave the Potter Heiress unpleasant emotions.

"Ra," the Succubus confirmed. "My House tried its best to remove the rituals' nauseating influence, but as you can see, my predecessors and ancestors weren't really successful."

"You did not act decisively," the Dark Queen growled.

"Chaos," Alexandra's tone, she hoped, was a good warning to not go further, "if Ra's disciples did half of what I suspect, the only way to remove the Light's taint would be to raze the island to its foundations."

"You would be correct," the blonde witch of the Scuola Regina said after a moment of silence. "And while House Sforza hasn't been shy in...demolishing certain Light monuments in the past decades, several of the monks and the Priests who work on this island have ties to the Army of Light and the Trinity. They likely wouldn't go down without sounding the alarm."

"And attacking the island itself with magic would result in a breach of the Statute of Secrecy," Teleklos Arali said. The Champion of the Sumerian Power, surprisingly for the reputation of the deity he serves, was surprisingly courteous and...shy? Alexandra was not going to use the word out loud, but it seemed so.

That said, Teleklos remained dangerous-looking. He was extremely tall, largely a full head taller than she was, and with the muscles to give him an athletic body. There was no sign he was lazy or disturbingly unskilled like Poliakov.

"Knowing these restrictions," the Champion of Tiamat continued, "I suggest finding the clue and leaving this place. The walls may be beautiful, but they were enchanted to repel assaults from outside and inside. Do not forget it, for the Light won't."

"Thank you for the reminder," Alexandra nodded shortly before watching all the other Champions present...including Eleonora da Riva, who unlike them did not seem affected, for obvious reasons, by what some Light Champion had done long ago. "As for leaving this place, I would do it gladly, but we have to find the clue first. And I have to admit that in thirty minutes, my efforts amounted to nothing."

"I must admit the same happened to me," Lucrezia Sforza reported.

"No trace of a keyhole or a secret vault the Judges dug up here," Lyudmila seemed to get a bit more...presentable. Or at least not seconds away from vomiting. "Death, are you sure your enigma told you nothing more?"

"I gave you the enigma, right? 'At the end of the path, remember that a key can open more than a door'."

"Philosophy...what a curse," the Dark Queen muttered. "We may have overlooked something."

"We are Champions," Teleklos began in a quiet tone which, for some reason, resonated in a very sinister manner next to the graves of San Michele. "We have all tried to search for the keyhole or the artefact which is tied to the Queen's key. If none of us have been able to find it in the cemetery, we must admit the evidence: the clue for the Fourth Task isn't anywhere in this cemetery."

"The problem," Eleonora said cautiously, "is that I entered the churches, and I'm sorry to say, there isn't anything worth mentioning inside it. The chapel and the two churches are largely empty, with no place to hide anything."

"Really nothing?" Susan inquired.

"There might be a few treasures left and the quarters of the Priests aren't opened for visits," the Champion of Innocence said. "But since the Trinity removed the lions in the interior court and the museums got the remaining ones, we don't have-"

And then the brown-haired Champion of the Scuola Regina stopped, realising what she had just said.

"The lion," Eleonora da Riva said weakly. "Do you think?"

"Do we think the Crystal Lion had far more importance than giving a splendid trophy to the Champion who discovered it?" Alexandra rolled her eyes. "Well, yes, personally, I do."

"Where is the lion now?"

"Still at Ca'Sforza," the Succubus informed the Champion of Tiamat. "We wanted to make sure the Doge and Day Courts remained in the dark about our progress in this matter."

"There's still plenty of time if we hurry."

"Agreed." The Champion of the Morrigan grimaced. "But that confirms what I thought for months."

"Oh, let me think...that the Judges are sadists?"

"Exactly," Alexandra darkly hissed. "Exactly..."

**17 January 1995, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Neville was back.

He was back, seated at the Gryffindor table, and listening to the conversations of his fellow Lions.

This wasn't the Scuola Regina and its multitudes of traditions and unsaid rules that left him always baffled. This was Hogwarts. This was where he belonged.

"And the Falmouth Falcons beat the Tutshill Tornadoes last week-end," Seamus finished after devouring what was the last bite of his dinner's principal meal.

"You didn't say anything about the Chudley Cannons!" Ron protested.

"What is there to say?" Seamus grinned. "They were annihilated by the Wimbourne Wasps. I hear Ludo Bagman took the time to congratulate them himself from Venice."

"It isn't like he has anything more important to do," Alicia Spinnet snickered. "The Judges of the Tournament are way too intelligent to use him for the entertainment."

"He may still entertain everyone," Dean claimed, and everyone turned his head in his direction. "What? He's part of the British delegation, no? He will have to wear a costume for the Carnival...no?"

"Ah, yes, he will..." Katie chuckled. "That promises to be...an interesting experience."

"A terrifying experience, Katie," Alicia corrected on the spot, before insisting "a terrifying experience. I think he's going to try to modify Quidditch robes to look like a proper costume."

Neville grimaced when his head conjured an image of what the final 'costumed Ludo Bagman' may look like.

"Don't forget the Headmaster and his assistants," Lavender said in a false innocent voice.

"The Headmaster," Lego began but Parvati did not let him finish.

"The Headmaster's robes are a perpetual crime against our eyes," one of the Gossip Queens of House Gryffindor retorted nastily. "I shudder at the idea of what he will consider an appropriate costume."

"Well, I don't know," Fay Dunbar remarked. "There are plenty of roles made for old men...the Comedia dell'arte scenes are famous for turning them into ridiculous characters."

"You are studying the Comedia dell'arte now?" Neville was so surprised the question escaped his throat within seconds.

"Of course," Parvati replied. "We need to study properly the Fourth Task if we want to be *fashionable spectators*."

"And moreover," Lavender supported her friend, "it isn't like Binns and Tiroflan are checking what we're doing during their classes. History is a joke, everyone knows it. So we're bringing important books."

Since neither Seamus nor Dean looked very much surprised by this declaration, Neville assumed this novelty had begun the moment the details of the Fourth Task were revealed by the Judges.

"The Hogwarts Library had interesting books about the Venetian Carnival?"

"No. Most of them were completely boring and were written from the point of view of jealous wizards unable to get the prestigious invitations. We had to order from Venice. Cho Chang and the other female substitutes were a big help."

The more Lavender spoke, the more Neville realised that contrary to what he had first thought, Hogwarts had indeed changed.

The Champion of House Gryffindor had come today to recruit as part of his Day King's duties. But he was beginning to feel as if the magic of the Task had already reached him.

"You bought Carnival books," Leo's voice was filled with suspicion, "for an event you aren't even sure to attend."

"I will be a spectator," Lavender looked at the Black Heir with what was not exactly a friendly expression.

"Neville didn't invite you."

Oh, thank you so much Leo, for that insulting comment...

"A fact I am very aware of, thank you very much," Lavender's gaze, when it turned towards him, was incredibly frosty. "But in case you haven't noticed, there is another Champion, besides Neville, who can invite Hogwarts students."

Leo watched the Gossip Queen for many seconds, clearly waiting for the 'it was a joke!'...that never came.

"You're not serious," the recently elevated Guard of the Day Court said at last. "Potter? That's who you're expecting to give you an invitation? You are not her friend and-"

A thunderous sound interrupted him.

Neville recognised this sound immediately, like everyone in the Great Hall; the sound of the great doors of Hogwarts opening. A sound that shouldn't be heard right now, for the sun had set hours ago and once every outside activity like Herbology lessons and Quidditch training was over, the castle closed. This didn't mean you couldn't enter or leave, Neville had arrived by the Floo after the International Portkey landed him at the Ministry, but walking by the official entrance had to wait by morning.

The Boy-Who-Lived had merely the time to think these points that Alexandra Potter walked into the Great Hall.

Immediately, the four tables exploded in excited chatter.

"You knew," Ron whispered angrily to Lavender and Parvati, who had both shifted to smug expressions visible ten miles away. "You knew she was coming here tonight!"

"We weren't sure it would be tonight," the Heiress of House Brown denied. "The Night Queen is very busy these days, preparing for the Carnival and her next victory at the Tournament."

"You know I am going to do my best to make sure she doesn't win, right?" Lavender looked at him like he had suddenly grown a second head while she wasn't looking.

"First of the Second Task, second of the Second Task, first of the Third Task," the Gryffindor blonde enumerated slowly as Potter walked up to the Ravenclaw table and began to deliver several golden letters that Neville was intimately familiar with. These were invitations to attend the Fourth Task as a spectator in the streets of Venice. "For now, she's the leader of the European Magical Tournament."

"Why is she giving them black letters in addition to the golden ones?" Neville asked slowly.

"Oh, that?" Parvati bared her teeth, and the future Lord Longbottom had to admit, it was...not giving him good feelings. "The number of spectators the Night Queen can possibly allow to attend is very limited, so she could enforce some conditions...mainly upon our costumes."

Neville blinked.

"The costumes of each Champion has to be unique. The same applies for plenty of members of each Court."

"Yes, but our costumes can and will be unique too! That's the condition Queen Alexandra Potter made known to everyone, at least." Lavender continued to have a smug expression...something that was very justified, because if the Ravenclaws, Slytherins, and Hufflepuffs came first, the Gryffindors were not forgotten by the Champion of House Ravenclaw.

"Longbottom," Potter said for sole greetings as she arrived at their table, "fancy meeting you there tonight."

"I am a student of Hogwarts too, you know."

"Of course," the witch who was going to be one of his chief opponents during the Fourth Task agreed, "it's just that I visit Hogwarts often, and for the last months, I hadn't seen you once here."

"We have classes and other obligations to attend during the day."

"So do I," the girl with mesmerising green eyes answered. "But Apparition is a wonderful thing when you want to visit your school. Lavender, Parvati. Your invitations."

The Boy-Who-Lived wasn't going to say the two Gossip Queens received it like one received a treasure...but it wasn't that far from it, in reverence and smiles.

"The conditions are in the black envelope, of course." The Ravenclaw who was going to be the Night Queen of the Fourth Task added. "If one detail poses a problem, immediately contact me by owl. We will solve it, even if I have to come to Hogwarts in person."

"Hey! The rules said-"

"Shut up, Black. I had to endure the sadism of the Judges today, I don't want to subject myself to your stupidity tonight."

Leo clearly hesitated...before his mouth closed without a single additional word.

"Good. Where are Fred and George, Katie?"

"They said that if you did visit this evening, you would find them at a certain place on the fourth floor."

"No doubt brewing something that is going to make an enormous prank," Potter grumbled, and on this one, Neville was ready to agree completely. "Anything else?"

"How did you have so many spectator invitations?" Neville asked her. "Unless you didn't give the other Champions of your Court any golden letters, you shouldn't have that many ready for Hogwarts."

This time, there was definitely amusement in the green eyes.

"Do you really expect me to honestly answer the question, oh Day King?"

"Yes," okay, it was likely going to fail, but if he didn't try...

"Well, I won't," Alexandra Potter said cheerfully as her snowy owl came to land on her right shoulder with a deep hoot of satisfaction. "The Judges know the answer to that question...that's all I'm going to say. Ciao!"

**18 January 1995, Ca'Sforza Palace, Venice**

"So...we know."

The large book of rules had been left open on the table while each Champion of the Night Court had taken a couch or a chair to sit on metres away from it.

The book was still important, and likely would be read and re-read tonight once they returned to the Scuola Regina. But for now, they had to decide what to do about the information they had gained.

"We know," Alexandra nodded. "To be honest, I didn't expect the Fourth Task to be that complex."

"I think no one expected that," Viktor Krum grimaced. "I certainly didn't expect it."

"There's a silver lining in all of this," Ambre de Courtois commented. "We didn't expect it, and we were already, in all likelihood, the side the most prepared for it. Now that we have the rules, we have a significant advantage."

"I'm not that optimistic," Lucrezia Sforza disagreed. "Remember what was said days ago. The Judges will give all the rules to everyone at the beginning of the Task."

"But it's something to know about it, and something else to build up a strategy on information you have just received," the French witch argued. "Not to mention that we can recruit Guards and Warlocks to make sure we have the most competitive Court according to the rules."

"She has a point," Eleonora da Riva supported Ambre. "You can change your strategy in the middle of the Task, though it won't be easy. But you can't change your Court."

"True. Now that it's been discussed, let's go back to the fundamentals. The keys."

Lucrezia Sforza grabbed her wand and wrote in the air the sum-up of what they had learned in the last hour from the book of rules that had led them to the four corners of Venice before finally returning to San Michele.

Minor addendum necessary: the Judges were complete sadists.

"Here is how it goes," their Succubus Host said. "We have, not counting the Aquamarine Keys, which are a category by itself, six different types of Keys in play for the Fourth Task."

*Diamond Keys – 10 Keys available – Reward: 10 points*

"This key is apparently the most straightforward," Lyudmila Romanov growled threateningly, the problems met from the Light-based rituals on San Michele's Island a thing of her past. "If a Champion holds one at the end of the Task, his or her Court will earn ten Points for his or her Court."

"Something extremely beneficial," Ambre de Courtois smiled, "for the criteria the Judges are going to judge us upon are nowhere to be seen in the rulebook."

"Indeed."

*Amethyst Keys – 20 Keys available – Reward: 1 point, Redoubt acquired*

"This key can be best described as...insurance." The Champion of Lust gave them a mischievous smile. "While the point it gives is useless by itself, it also rewards us with a secure location somewhere in Venice where no one can reach you without being disqualified instantaneously. The only drawback is that you can't use this hideout for more than twenty-four hours, and it is a single-use redoubt."

"If you use it before one of the days where the Task is not playing out, this can be a weapon by itself."

"At the price of having a Champion neutralised for twenty-four hours."

"Yes, but for the neutralisation to hold, the Day and the Doge would have to keep a large number of their Court members to enforce the blockade."

That wasn't as good as it sounded, really. The two other Courts had not the manpower problems of the Night.

*Emerald Keys – 20 Keys available – Reward: 2 points, Secret Passages acquired*

"This is certainly one of the most important keys," the Bulgarian Seeker spoke, and no one disagreed. "Whenever we locate one, acquiring it will be a priority."

"Agreed."

"Yes."

Each Emerald Key allowed its owner to use one of the secret passages the Judges would somehow create within Venice. Obviously, you had to find one of the exits of the secret passages in question before, but the Emerald Key synchronized with it guaranteed you were going to be the only one to use this avenue of escape and reinforcement.

*Sapphire Keys – 20 Keys available – Reward: 2 points, additional costume unlocked*

"This is obviously a safeguard if you lose your costumes' anonymity too quickly."

"And we can only choose the additional costume from what is available in the catalogue of thirteen different costume-making shops."

"That won't be a problem," Lucrezia Sforza assured them. "Most of them are the biggest sources of costumes among this Carnival. Right, Eleonora?"

"Right," the Champion of Innocence rolled her eyes. "I would advise everyone to avoid two of these shops, however. The Judges can say all they want that this is inviolate ground, but I'm ready to bet they would sell the costume to you and then hurry to call their friends so that this costume purchase is your last."

*Opal Key – 40 Keys available – Reward: 1 magical object authorised for a single day-use*

"Potentially, this is the worst key type of the six," the Dark Queen reacted.

"It all depends on the object." It wasn't an objection, really.

"It depends on the object and if you can find the chest where the object is stored," Ambre de Courtois said in an unconvinced tone. "At least where the secret passages are concerned, them being difficult to find makes sense and makes them useful by itself. And enchanted objects are exactly what we hired our Artificers for."

"We won't be able to run after every Key anyway," Viktor Krum said soberly.

"It will still be...advantageous to deny these artefacts to the two other Courts if we can," Alexandra told the other Champions thoughtfully.

"That would be prudent," the Succubus of the Night Court admitted. "And last but certainly not least: the Ruby Keys."

*Ruby Keys – 30 Keys available – Reward: 2 points, 100 Carnival Ducats*

"Of all the things they gave us as a surprise, this might be easily the worse," Eleonora commented drily. "The Keys were bad enough: we have to draw priorities between the Aquamarine ones and the rest. We have to make sure as few Champions as possible are not imprisoned or eliminated by the other Courts. But now there's another dimension."

"And this dimension is money."

Evidently, this money was entirely worthless outside the Venetian lagoon and the Carnival Civil War, a bit like Leprechaun's gold, except this currency couldn't even fool the most credulous and naive wizard of this world.

"If the Ruby Keys are here to give a bonus of Ducats, the chances are high one or more Aquamarine Key will demand us to have plenty of the Fourth Task's money in our purses," Lucrezia began in a tone of someone bearing bad news.

Alexandra approved.

"I can see the entrance of a ball or some important location requiring the purchase of a document you can only...acquire from a disguised Judge or Tournament-hired comedian for a certain sum of Ducats," the Potter Heiress spoke slowly. "That is just one of the possible scenarios I can imagine after a few minutes of reflection. I'm sure there are others we will be able to find out in due time."

"And after that, there are the other rules," Viktor Krum said with a haunted look. "I think we can't delay the selection of the Warlocks and the Guards any longer."

"You're right," Alexandra replied. "What are your suggestions?"

**19 January 1995, Ca'Bellicosa Palace, Venice**

The moment the costume was out of its charmed slipcover, there was only one answer Fleur could give.

"No! Don't even think about it."

The choice of the Champion of War was so astonishing that it finally got Yegor Poliakov out of his alcoholic stupor.

"Err...but that's...that's a costume of...Dark Queen..."

"Exactly!" Romeo beamed like he was a genius and they the imbeciles unable to grasp his brilliant idea. "It will be so obvious they will not dare attack you!"

"Or they will think I'm the Chosen of Loki and attack in overwhelming force!" the half-Veela countered angrily.

"They won't have overwhelming force," the bloodthirsty maniac grinned. "Not if we have dozens of guards ready to ambush them at the first wrong step they make."

Fleur watched the costume for several seconds. It represented things she abhorred, that much was true. It was still a beautiful disguise. The materials were layer after layer of black enchanted silk, and whoever had created it had at least not gone for the spikes and the bones so many 'dark costumes' embraced. And the mask must be pretty expensive too, with the black jewels embedded in it and the exotic black feathers surrounding the piece supposed to cover her face. There were so many black feathers in fact it was like a corona of darkness.

For a few heartbeats, the Champion of Life was tempted.

Then she noticed a problem. A big one.

"This costume has nothing to hide my hair."

"Indeed. You will have to dye it black."

Her wand was in her right hand and a Light offensive spell on her lips the second after.

But the 'Doge' deflected the attack effortlessly.

"If the black is not to your taste-"

"Not a word," the Beauxbatons Champion glared at the most infuriating Dark Champion she'd ever met, "my answer is no. I won't don this costume."

"You will."

"NO!"

"Yes."

"NO!"

"Yes."

"NO!"

"Yes."

"You two are getting too loud," Poliakov grimaced while showing them the expression of a man being on the receiving end of a colossal headache. "Come on, those are just costumes."

"After seeing what he has in mind for me," Fleur pointed out acidly. "Do you really want our dear 'King' to be the one to choose your costumes for this Carnival, Poliakov?"

"Now that you said it like that...no," the Dark Champion admitted. "Sorry, War, I have to support her. Two voices against one. We will choose our own costumes."

"Actually...it's one kingly voice against two minor ones. The kingly voice wins."

If the Dark Champion of the Scuola Regina was even more satisfied with himself, his knees were going to explode and his head would swell like a balloon.

"This doesn't work like that," the blonde half-Veela protested.

"Well, according the set of complete rules available to the Champions, it does."

Fleur blinked. What was Malatesti talking about? The Doge Court had only been granted what little information the Judges revealed to everyone, and since they hadn't an enigma to guide them, searching for the Tournament Clue across the lagoon was evidently a waste of time. Their Court had no hope to find additional information, and with the Day Court fumbling like buffoons everywhere they went, it wasn't like...no. Oh, no.

"The Night Court has found the book of rules we are going to be given at the beginning of the Fourth Task."

"I like how smart you are when you aren't letting your prejudices blind you." The compliment...and it was a compliment...was both giving her a sweet and bitter taste in her stomach. "Yes, that's exactly it. Lucrezia Sforza, with her Queen's benediction, was kind enough to give me that piece of news."

Poliakov reacted to this announcement in a very predictable manner: he went forwards for the bottles and poured in his glass an impressive quantity of vodka.

"Hey!" Malatesti seemed unpleased by this move reeking of drunkenness. "You may be the Champion of Seth, but that does not-"

"Then how am I supposed to act, oh Champion of Ares?" Yegor gave them a look filled with something they had rarely seen in him the last days: sorrowful clarity. "The dice have been cast. For better or for worse, everything ends with this Task. Unless we are supposed to forget that our Court represents the old order and the International Confederation of Wizards?"

"Some might say," Fleur said carefully, feeling like an intruder in this conversation. "That every end brings new beginnings."

Poliakov chuckled.

"Well, it's true enough, I suppose. Where there is life, there's hope, or so goes the saying. And you're the Champion of Life, so maybe we have hope...though with the two Courts having massive advantages over us-"

"We have the numbers." Romeo Malatesti interrupted in a very arrogant and proud manner. "Sometimes that's all it takes."

"It's not enough and you know it." The Dark Champion emptied his glass in a single gulp before coughing like there was no tomorrow for him.

"It will be if you go with my choice of costumes. According to the rules-"

"The rules are only enforced the moment the Tournament begins, or shortly before it." It was only a guess Fleur had, but it was a reasonable one. The Judges couldn't verify for a month that everyone followed the Court Kings and Queen's commands; even with the best monitoring enchantments in the world and five wizards to check on each Champion, it would be sheer madness to try that. "Am I right?"

Romeo Malatesti grimaced.

"How did you know?"

"I wasn't certain, but thank you for confirming it."

Poliakov laughed hysterically before collapsing onto a black couch with pillows in the colours of House Malatesti.

In a common accord, the Champion of Life and the Champion of War decided to ignore him.

"I choose seven costumes for you, including this one," the leader of the Doge Court said after a silence which seemed to stretch for an eternity. "That's my best effort, I won't go below that."

Staring into those – for once – very serious black irises, Fleur tried to guess whether it was because his 'patrons' had given him firm orders for the Fourth Task of next month...or because the crazy plans of War to win this Task involved costumes that were the antithesis of what she wanted.

One thing, alas, was for sure: Romeo Malatesti wasn't going to negotiate down...and unfortunately, he held all the cards. Fleur could more or less get away with a single costume, the one she would wear at the Carnival's opening ceremony, but if all Champions and Court members had to obey the Doge's orders during the Task itself...

Fleur knew she was going to have to ask someone from the Night Court. Preferably someone who was not going to laugh in her face...like Eleonora da Riva. But in her heart, the half-Veela feared she already knew the answer. Malatesti's bluffs were really easy to see through...and today, she didn't think a single lie had been said.

"I want to see the costumes first," the Champion of Life said firmly, ignoring some of her instincts who told her to refuse the 'negotiation' in its totality...

**20 January 1995, Ca'Sforza Palace, Venice**

"Ouch."

Alexandra wasn't really in pain, of course, but she would be lying if she said the experience had been extremely pleasant. Her Invisibility Cloak, as the name implied, turned you invisible when the Potter Heiress wore it. It didn't absorb the shocks.

"You can stay where you are," the Succubus she had fallen atop of purred in a very satisfied voice. "If you get closer, you can-"

"No, thanks."

Alexandra stood up extremely quickly, and removed her Invisibility Cloak completely...it had already revealed her legs when she fell, so as per the rules, the training exercise was over.

"You beat your previous record," Ambre de Courtois informed her with a watch. "It's forty seconds, this time. That's...err...six seconds more than the last time."

"Wonderful," Alexandra said sarcastically as after a nod, the Succubi and other Sforza attendants simulating the 'Venetian crowd' took several steps back and returned to more relaxed behaviours. "I'm beginning to think that invisible or not, it is really going to be a challenge to travel in the streets during the Carnival."

"It will," Lucrezia Sforza told her with a smirk upon her lips. "Have no doubt about it, my Queen, the Carnival's crowds are...unlike any other. In fact, I like to think everything in the carnivals we organise in our city is unlike anything to be found elsewhere in the world."

Listening to the Champion of Lust, Alexandra had no doubt whatsoever the Succubus loved Venice. For all the flaws and prejudices she had shown so far, hypocrisy when it came to her home city wasn't one of the sins one could lay to the feet of the Sforza Heiress.

"The experience is...going to last a lifetime in our memories," the Champion of the Morrigan answered honestly. Whether their lives would be short or long depended a lot on their skills to survive in this very dangerous environment, of course. Alexandra changed the subject of the conversation. "I'm beginning to think the Judges should have handed us a dagger or two for the authorised weapons. If there's so many men and women in a single street, drawing a rapier is going to be a challenge by itself, never mind fighting another Champion."

"That's certainly a good point," Lucrezia replied before frowning. "Unfortunately, if we really go for daggers either for the offense or the defence, we'd better make sure we aren't caught by a Judge with one. The penalties for 'forbidden magical foci' are...unpleasant to deal with."

"Good point." Alexandra sighed. "I knew it intellectually, but until this 'training', I think there's always a part of me that believed I would be able to do something spectacular like in the previous three Tasks."

"You're hardly the only one who thought that," the French Champion snorted loudly. "I don't have your monstrous magical reserves, but there are attacks which can be extremely powerful provided you have hours to prepare them...but here, in the middle of thousands of spectators? It's better to forget it. We all could find a hideout and tamper with wards in order to avoid detection...but how would we strike the correct target when it is going to be extremely difficult to distinguish who is who?"

"Our dear host knows perfectly well the answer to this question."

"Indeed," Lucrezia chuckled before returning to a more serene expression. "Indeed. The reality is that once the 'infallible' tracking methods of the Light are cancelled, the most reliable method for the members of each Court to find another is via the 'challenges' we must complete to earn each Key."

This was, at the risk of insisting a bit too much on the subject, a particularly sadistic option chosen by the Judges.

With each Key won, be it an Aquamarine one or not, you were certainly closer to victory...but with each one, the potential to attract countless enemies also rose as your opponents had fewer 'challenge grounds' to monitor.

Sure, some trials would likely not do the equivalent of ring a bell to summon the Day and Doge Court. The rulebook had given them a few examples, and some did not look too dangerous. Solving a riddle or singing a famous tune in public would likely not raise many eyebrows, not during a Venetian Carnival. But others...well, if the 'examples' proved true, it was likely an entire Court would rush towards your position before the challenge was over.

"Why do I think," Ambre de Courtois asked in what was obviously a rhetorical question, "that before the end of this Carnival, all the members of the Night Court will be experts in the art of running away?"

"Don't forget the art of creating the most elaborate distractions and diversions," Alexandra pointed out.

"Oh, thank you, your Majesty. Like I was going to forget that."

Lucrezia Sforza clapped her hands.

"I would love to let you debate on the skills the Fourth Task will force us to master, but now that Her Majesty has confirmed an Invisibility Cloak, no matter how ancient and respectable, is not appropriate for the Venetian Carnival, we have plenty of magical artefacts to test."

"I volunteer to be the Champion who will launch the 'Paint Bombs' at my vile enemies." All in the name of magical science...and totally not because she had been hit by several hexes minutes ago.

"This is retribution for the different spells we managed to corner you with, isn't it? Your Majesty?"

"Vengefulness is the prerogative of offended royalty," the Potter Heiress proclaimed high and loud.

"See?" Lucrezia Sforza said smugly. "Let's thank the Powers we caught her at fourteen, in three or four years, she would be as bad as the Dark Queen of Durmstrang."

"Hey!"

**21 January 1995, Ca'Sforza Palace, Venice**

Alexandra didn't react until Eleonora da Riva arrived in front of her with the costume.

"If it is one of your attempts at a joke, dear Innocence, consider me very impressed."

"This isn't a joke."

A Succubus chuckled behind her. The Champion of the Morrigan decided to hide it.

"This is a costume of Sun Queen."

Alexandra may not be an expert when it came to the costumes of the Venetian Carnival – though in the last days, her personal knowledge had grown by leaps and bounds – but a mere glance at this one could tell you which role the disguise was supposed to transform you into.

"Technically, it is not."

"Oh? This golden silk and the flamboyant spikes are not supposed to imitate the sun?"

"No, my apologies. I meant that technically, this costume is called 'Princess of the Sun'. So in theory, it is not for a *Queen*...*your Majesty*."

Alexandra sighed in despair. This was...worse, now that she was given the full explanation.

"I am unconvinced," the Queen of the Night Court replied.

"You gave your full support when it came to the other Champions, and they were handed roles which are the complete opposites of their day-to-day behaviour."

Alexandra stayed silent for a few seconds...before deciding that whatever she did, it was best not to be a hypocrite.

"Fine. You have a good point. And I won't try to say the Army of Light will try to kill me if they see me in such a costume, because they intend to kill me anyway. Yes, this is an original way to hide in plain sight." Eleonora grinned. "But seriously, there are other themes which can fulfil the same purpose. Why do I have to look like I am painted in gold?"

"The lower part of your mask is silver," the Scuola Regina's Champion corrected...accurately.

"The rest of the costume is gold or imbued with some essence of yellow," Alexandra talked back.

"She has a point." Lucrezia Sforza stepped forwards to participate more actively in this conversation. "Tell her why this costume is important, *Eleonora*."

"Yes, *Lucrezia*," the Champion of Innocence rolled her eyes. "This is not just a costume we worked together to ensure the two Courts won't think you are under it. This is a costume which can allow you to attract all the attention during one of the opera premieres of La Fenice."

Alexandra had heard many times this name since visiting Venice for the first time.

Enough to groan in consternation mere seconds later.

"You're not serious. I am anything but an opera singer."

"Your girlfriend didn't share this opinion."

Of course, the too-curious Succubus had gone to Susan first...what a vile betrayal.

"If you spoke of my tastes of music, you will also know that since I am an Animagus, my singing performance ranges from terrible to abysmal. I can't stop myself from hissing at the worst moment possible-"

"That's completely natural when you're a young Animagus," the Champion of Lust dismissed the argument with a flicker of pink magic upon her nail. "And honestly, we aren't going to ask of you the impossible. You won't recite half an hour of opera lyrics in front of everyone in La Fenice."

That...that was good.

"Not unless you want to, at least," Eleonora smirked.

"Not funny," Alexandra murmured before changing the subject to one which was frankly far more important in her eyes. "You think one or several challenges about the Aquamarine Keys is going to wait for us inside La Fenice."

"Several of the Tournament's...benefactors have spent considerable sums of money on La Fenice these last years," Lucrezia informed her. "Some of it is part of the security efforts to ensure there is no third fire to destroy it like the Phoenix it takes its name from...but wards to protect from the flames don't cost that much money and don't require a year of work."

"And frankly, there aren't that many marvels of Venice which are more famous than La Fenice," the Light Champion said. "Yes, there is the Doge Palace and the Bridge of Sighs, the Rialto Bridge, and a few other landmarks everyone knows about, but many of them can't welcome eight hundred spectators."

"Not to mention it would fit with the idea of the 'challenges' the Judges have in mind for us." It was only a guess, supported by intuition and nothing more, but it didn't invalidate anything the Judges or the rulebook had given them in terms of instructions. "Thus a costume of Light Princess so I can visit La Fenice every day?"

"It's my advice you could use it as a refuge too." Lucrezia bared her teeth. "I pity the fools who will try to hunt you in La Fenice once I will have taught you some of its secrets."

"Some members of the Doge Court are students of the Scuola Regina," the Potter Heiress didn't make it a powerful objection, but she was curious-

"Yes, but they aren't ones to visit Venice for a good theatrical play or admire an opera premiere, believe me."

"If you say so." For all she tried, Alexandra couldn't help but keep some unconvinced edge in her voice. "What now?"

"Now you wear your costume for the first time."

Naturally, it was something easier said than done.

There were multiple layers, beginning with the undergarments, and after that point, many things were horribly complicated to don. Only the shoes, which looked like delicate princess' slippers, proved to be no problem.

No, let's be fair. The costume was extremely comfortable. It had to be enchanted to perfection, because no matter how many pieces of gold her body disappeared under, there was no sensation of warmth or cold...it was as if everything had been perfectly arranged for you to have the sensation you could live in this costume for days.

"No problem?"

"It fits me like a glove," Alexandra answered Eleonora, "no pun intended," the Champion of Death added precipitously when the co-Mistress of Costumes helped her place another pair of long gloves upon her hands and forearms.

"I can handle the pun," the other female Champion smiled before grabbing the mask which would complete the golden costume. "Questions?"

"Most of the enchantments will ensure that I don't freeze," Alexandra examined what she wore, and tried not to think about the price such a costume would likely come with in an authentic Venetian costume-maker's shop. "But my magical foci?"

"There is a secret pocket for your wand," Eleonora touched a point on her right arm which could easily be accessed like one of her holsters, "but for the rapiers, I'm afraid it is completely impossible to fit something like it."

"Which might be a good thing," the Dark Champion of Lust informed her. "The Day and the Doge Kings and their lackeys will be particularly on the look-out for people ostensibly armed with blades in public. You not having one would tend to decrease the suspicions."

"I will trust your word on this."

"Good. And now for the finishing touch." Alexandra thought their host was speaking about the mask, and in a certain manner, this was true. An unfamiliar material caressed her visage, and a second later, it was...fantastic. There should have been restrictions upon her eyesight, but if anything, the Venetian mask seemed to magnify her Hydra's sight, and her inner animal hissed in satisfaction.

An instant later, something bit her violently in her neck.

Two seconds later, Alexandra was fully naked.

"LUST!" Emerald lightning ran on her arms, preparing for an attack that, while not fatal, would teach the Succubus a lesson-

"Check your neck."

Alexandra mastered the outflow of magic and touched. It smelled like a flower, and when she touched, it certainly had the texture of one, but-

Ah, of course.

"Was it really necessary to force me to wear the costume before making sure I turned up naked?" the Champion of House Ravenclaw asked peevishly as Eleonora da Riva burst into a maniacal laughter.

"No, but you have to admit," Lucrezia's eyes, unlike Eleonora, didn't turn away a single instant and her words were a dangerous purr, "how I did it is far more amusing."

**22 January 1995, Ca'Luce Palace, Venice**

Starting this Sunday, it had been decided that the Day Court would meet every day after noon at Ca'Luce.

For some reason, Cedric had not felt something like dread embrace his heart when the words had been spoken.

There should have been some thunderous noise of doom, though. Because as the different Champions and the other court members gathered, it was clear it was going to be a disaster.

The order of the day was to approve – or if they weren't satisfying, to refuse – the first choice of costume made by every Champion.

Naturally, there was no logic, no unifying theme.

The Champion of Hufflepuff had decided quite early on that since it was Venice, it was better to go for at least a few costumes that would be decidedly acknowledged as traditionally Venetian.

And of all the traditions of Venice, few were more famous than the gondolier who sailed through its small and great canals. Naturally, concessions had to be made: the Judges wanted the costume to be unique.

But there were skilled students at the Scuola Regina who were sworn to secrecy, and the result was rather good: he had gone for a top which was a combination of green and silver stripes – the gondolier's formal clothes should be blue and white – while his stop was a bright silver. All in all, it was a very Slytherin-themed costume, completed with a ribbon of blue to serve as an improvised belt.

Maybe it was going to fool no one. Maybe he had been too clever and a lot of his efforts would be completely wasted. Cedric's thoughts, when they turned pessimistic, were whispering it would be the former.

But whatever happened, the son of Amos Diggory could rather proudly tell that neither the Hufflepuffs that had chosen to stand by his side nor himself were the most ridiculous members of the Day Court. They may not fool everyone, but at least their costumes were something which would not make a Venetian howl in laughter for hours.

"Merlin's beard," Eurig Cadwallader murmured next to him, "Falk's costume is ridiculous."

"He's trying to imitate the clothes of nobles from the eighteenth century...I think." Cedric hesitated. "He's not doing a very good job."

"I would be more concerned about the white-silver wig, Cedric," the Hufflepuff Guard he had chosen scoffed. "And the shoes. Honestly. Red shoes. And look at those heels. Did someone remind him that we will have to walk and run for several hours in these costumes? Morgana's dark soul, did someone try to replace half of his costume for a female one while he had his back turned?"

"Yes, it's...not good." In fact, it was likely to be far worse than that.

"I think-"

"Yes, yes, you made your opinion very clear, Eurig." Cedric tried to keep his grimace as low-key as possible. "But as a Champion of this humble Tournament, I have to keep the goals of the Fourth Task in mind."

"And?"

"And no one made the presentations, but I recognised Champion Falk effortlessly, even with three of his friends accompanying him in full masque costumes."

"Well, yes," Eurig snorted, clearly not seeing where he was going. "His ego is so large it is really difficult to mistake him for someone else."

"And if we can recognise him in a second or two, so can Alexandra Potter and most of the members of the Night Court."

The Hufflepuff Guard froze immediately.

"Ah."

Cedric was a noble member of the House of Helga Hufflepuff; therefore he avoided the 'yes, ah' or the other sarcastic remarks that would have been extremely easy to deliver, despite how they begged to be let off his tongue.

"And he's not the only one, by the way."

"Longbottom?"

"Longbottom. I don't know what he was trying to do coming in with a costume sort of parodying the French King Louis XIV, but not only does he not have the shoulders for the role, everyone can see how impatient he is from his steps alone."

That too, was something the other two Courts would have no difficulty recognising the moment the Tournament began. Well, maybe the Doge Court would have difficulties recognising it. Maybe. They didn't have a Hogwarts Champion with them, and though it wasn't against the rules, no one had seen them anywhere near Hogwarts or Hogwarts substitutes.

And of course, the Night Court would recognise him instantly. Cedric could, and he wasn't a fourth-year who had studied with the Boy-Who-Lived for his first three years at the Scottish castle.

"Patience...there's nothing in the rules that forbids us from ending this Task in a single day, Cedric."

It was difficult not to despair after these words as Giovanni Ruspoli arrived in a monk's costume that looked as credible as the royalty disguise worn by their King, which was not very. Cedric wasn't an expert, but he was sure monks didn't carry two books with them wherever they went. And by Merlin's beard, they didn't have a pair of gold bracelets where gemstones shone in magical lights.

"Eurig. What applies to one Court is valid for the two others. There's nothing in the rules the Judges have given us which forbids us to win the Task in a single day, you're absolutely right about that. But the Doge and Night Courts have the opportunity to win in a single day too."

"Ah." The other Hufflepuff stared open-mouthed for a few seconds. "Well, if it happens, we can party for the rest of the Carnival, no?"

This might seem cowardly, but Cedric didn't think it was that bad of an idea...

**1 February 1995, Ca'Sforza Palace, Venice**

"Changelina. I want my sun gloves."

There was a caress upon her skin, and suddenly the shining golden gloves nearly covering the entirety of her arms were there, like they'd always been.

"Changelina. You can remove the sun gloves."

The sensation of caress came again, and the gloves disappeared. Thanks to her Hydra's eyes, Alexandra was able to see the minuscule sparks of emerald magic.

"Truly, it is a fantastic invention," Alexandra commented while leaving the couch where she had been seated. "It takes a while to get used to it and master some of its functionalities, but the benefits are enormous."

"Glad you agree," Lucrezia Sforza purred.

"Don't think I forgot how you got me naked the first time, Lust," the Champion of the Morrigan gave a mocking glare to the Succubus. "My revenge will be terrible."

"I am eagerly awaiting it."

Of course, she did. If the currently blonde Champion was half-way normal, Alexandra would have already cursed her so that her clothes disappeared at the most inopportune time. But with a Succubus, this would likely result in the 'prank victim' thanking her...

"Anyway. I heard Doria and Feuerbach successfully smuggled the Alchemical components they needed?"

"They did," Lucrezia confirmed. "Your girlfriend and Vulchanova should have their own assets in place before the next forty-hours are over. So far, we have encountered no problem."

"Well, the items in question are rather easy to hide...and some of them aren't even magically active. In addition to that, the quantities we speak about aren't that significant."

"Evidently," Alexandra replied, "I'm willing to twist the rules to my advantage, but if we are able to summon an entire army from nowhere within the first two days, the Judges are going to fall upon us like a pack of wolves, whether we are victorious or not."

"Our dear Champion of Chaos didn't agree with your point of view."

Alexandra chuckled. Whatever happened in the future, at least some things remained the same and convinced her she wasn't living in a world of illusions. The bickering between the Champion of Loki and the Champion of Venus was definitely one of those things.

"The Dark Queen didn't, yes, but this time, I am not willing to even consider this idea. If we somehow manage to transport enough assets, both in skeletons and otherwise, we're going to have one hundred points removed before we can say 'Tournament'. And while winning the Fourth Task is important, I'm not exactly willing to discover how big my punishment will be after the Judges have deliberated on it."

The gold rewards and the other trophies slipping through her fingers would be an inconvenience at that point. Losing more gold, influence, and reputation however would be a major problem.

"Not that it will be a surprise to you, but our benefactors are making sure Loki's Chosen behaves."

The Succubus was right; it was not a surprise.

"I expected something like that," the Potter Heiress confessed. "The Guards and the Warlocks' costumes?"

"Eleonora is making the finishing touches of the Guards' unifying costumes. The Warlocks will need two or three more days, I'm afraid." The Changelina of her Succubus host went to replace her black tight dress by a more conventional winter attire of blue and green. "I'm not complaining, but being only able to work with two Guards or two Warlocks is slowing us down."

"I wish we could make things easier for you, oh Mistress of Costume," the green-eyed witch wasn't joking there; with how skilled Eleonora and Lucrezia were, making their costume-creating task easier was very much something she would do if she could. "But to preserve secrecy, some...concessions have to be made."

All Champions knew who had been recruited to be part of the Night Court. This was something that had never been debated, since each and every senior participant of the Fourth Task was involved in the deliberations and the selection procedures.

But if the Champions knew the entire order of battle of the Night Court, the same couldn't be said about the Artificers, the Guards, and the Warlocks. Obviously, all of them knew who the Champions were, it could hardly be otherwise when the entire Scuola Regina student body and half of Europe likely knew the repartition of Champions between the three Courts.

The Night Court, after much reflection, had decided to innovate. The Artificers were working in duo, and once the Fourth Task would formally start, each specialist wizard or witch, with the notable exception of the Weasley Twins, would work with someone having different abilities and completely independently of the others. That way, if a duo of Artificers was arrested, not only the Night Court would not suffer a completely crippling loss, the Day or the Doge Courts would have no idea where the other Artificers were hiding, even if they somehow had access to Veritaserum.

"Our court is a court of independent cells," Lucrezia nodded seriously. "It has proved...convenient in the past for many wizards and witches blessed by the Powers of the Dark."

So the Exchequer had adopted a similar strategy to ensure the Army of Light and other fanatical organisations led by Ra didn't wipe them out in a single campaign. Why was she not surprised?

"The only question is how we will associate the Warlocks and the Guards, Alexandra," as they descended the truly marvellous crystal stairs on their way to leave Ca'Sforza, the Ravenclaw Champion noticed there was far more agitation than usual this evening. It was interesting...but it had not been exactly a secret that, with the date of the Carnival approaching fast, the Headmistress of Scuola Regina was using the palace to welcome several prestigious invitees. "Due to the Night Court having really few Guards, we can't exactly pair a duo of Warlocks with a duo of Guards to form a cell."

"And since we want to keep the identities of the Warlocks secret from the Guards when they won't be associated, we can't check beforehand if they work together well." Alexandra winced. "I think we will have to pair each duo of Guards with a duo of Warlocks."

"That will leave three duos of Warlocks alone..."

"Two duos, technically."

"Ah yes, two duos...the third one has its own duties." This time it was Lucrezia Sforza's turn to frown and make a thoughtful expression. "I never thought much about it in the first days, but our limited numbers really force us to think a lot about the roles we will play and the kind of operations we can prepare for."

"True, but think about all the problems we don't have." Alexandra allowed herself a genuine moment of laughter. "If half of the facts Viktor Krum was able to confirm are true, the recruitment of the fifty-one members of the Day Court is resulting in serious feuds every day."

"Don't underestimate the real power behind the throne," there was a smile on Lucrezia's lips, but the light of concern in her eyes was definitely not feigned. "Ra is going to give his marching orders soon, if he has not already done so, and though Eleonora and Fleur Delacour are not under his control, he has five Light Champions and a small army to accomplish his will."

"I assure you, I have no intention to underestimate him." Underestimating a being as powerful and ancient as the self-proclaimed Archmage of the Light was an excellent way to die very young. And since she was a Hydra Animagus, Alexandra knew better than to hope for a quick and painless death. "But I believe Krum is right when he says the Day Court is a madhouse where no one is really in control of anything. Ra will give his orders, which are almost certainly to hunt and kill us with extreme prejudice. But it is going to be chaotic. It is going to be a chaotic and poorly-prepared hunt. And Falk and his friends will likely want to go after the Doge Court at the same time."

"Let's hope you are right." They rapidly crossed the palace's gardens, and the doors opened quickly before them. "When do you want the next meeting of the Champions to happen?"

"Not tomorrow for sure," Alexandra fatalistically replied, "Eleonora really wants to convince me her last project is the perfect tenth costume..."

"It is an extraordinary piece of art!"

Alexandra raised her eyes in consternation.

"I feel half-naked just by glancing at it..."

"That's exactly the purpose, my Queen."

**1 February 1995, Ca'Luce Palace, Venice**

In case anyone wondered, yes, the Ca'Luce Palace belonged to Ra, Archmage of Light.

If there had been any doubt before today, it was now clearly and truly over.

An entirely new wing they had been barred from entering was now open, and the decoration was all about Phoenixes, gold, and priceless Light artefacts.

Henri de Condé wasn't stupid enough to believe this was the only wing of Ca'Luce they had been denied entry to. No, if they had been summoned here and the gates of lights were open, it was that Ra's plans required it for his war against the Dark. It certainly wasn't because someone had made a petition and it had been accepted.

"**Praise the Light Powers for the holy blessings they deliver in the war against the Great Enemy. Praise Life, for as long as it repels Death, you enjoy the purity of existence**."

Minor point he hadn't really accepted before being ordered to kneel: the hall which was occupying most of this palace wing was not a dining hall or anything similar: it was a sanctum dedicated to the Light Powers.

In blunt terms, it was a hidden Church of the Light.

"**Praise Order, for it is the great and only rampart we have to defend ourselves from Chaos**."

Henri felt the power of Horus stir and swoon. The Falcon God loved being worshipped, no matter what Ra and the higher leadership of the Light wanted him to do.

"**Praise Wisdom, for as we drink in its well of knowledge and creativity, we avoid the dark schemes of Confusion**."

The church hall – let's call it what it is – was truly crowded today. With Space-Expansion Charms and the appropriate Runes, one could make a room truly gigantic, and the architects of this place had revelled in the challenge.

The result was that over two thousand humans were kneeling before the Archmage on his golden platform.

Of course, not all were wizards and witches.

Dire circumstances or not, the Army of Light and the Trinity couldn't afford gathering two thousand agents, be they magical or non-magical, within a single city without abandoning a quantity of important duties elsewhere.

"**Praise Innocence, for it is by this radiance we know we can avoid the sinful ways of Lust**."

There wasn't a whisper of disagreement. Ra of course had made sure there wouldn't be one.

But Henri wondered how many in the audience were thinking the same thing he did.

"**Praise Unity, for it is together we will stand and win against the lonely bloodthirst of War**."

Of all the prayers to make...this one had to be the biggest lie of all.

Seven Champions of the Light had been summoned magically.

Yet only five had come.

Henri didn't really know how the Exchequer had achieved it. Sure, there was power in choosing a different Court when the Archmage forbid you to, but until this morning, the Champion of Horus hadn't really been sure the Dark had the reach to do something like that, free will of the Champions or not.

Apparently, the French Champion had underestimated the old nemeses of the Trinity.

As he had no choice but to fight under the banner of the Light, it was anything but reassuring when it came to his survival odds.

"**Praise Judgement, for it is the sword that will sever Corruption and deliver destruction upon its malice**."

The Light had summoned many dangerous wizards and witches, along with other beings who should never have been allowed near a Carnival.

But Henri knew better than to think that it was a good idea.

This was not so much breaking the rules as completely ignoring them.

"**Praise Fate, for under its eternal vigil, the Light remains strong and true**."

And Henri knew it was weakening Fate.

There were deeds that strengthened the Seventh Power, and outright discarding the terms handed out by the enemy was not one of them.

"Praise Life! Praise Order! Praise Wisdom! Praise Innocence! Praise Unity! Praise Judgement! Praise Fate!"

The spectators repeated with a martial pace of proclamation...and for many of them, the voices were utterly joyous.

"**Praise the Light Powers, my children. Long live the swords of Holy light, under the guidance of the Three Sacred Treasures. Whether you hail from the Army of Light or the Trinity, all of you are blessed beyond measure**. **And one of you will receive more blessings in this holy hour**."

What?

Ra had insisted the event would go exactly as he had told them yesterday, and woe to the one who would dare disturb the religious ceremony.

And now he was altering it, for all his 'holy behaviour'?

What a hypocrite...

Worse, as a monumental chest of gold was brought forwards, Henri had to acknowledge this wasn't a last-minute change.

No, this part had always been intended to take place today; the Archmage had just not deigned to inform them in advance.

The French pureblood had a bad feeling. Henri knew he wasn't going to like what was hidden in this heavily enchanted chest, and it wasn't because of the outrageous gold decoration proclaiming the greatness of Ra, supported by hundreds of jewels, most of them princely enough to be part of a sovereign's collection.

The bad feeling was more than justified as the chest opened and it was like a new sun had appeared in the Light sanctum.

"**Witness the greatest Light Artefact to ever be forged in the cradle of an Empire long destroyed by the forces of Darkness."** Ra's voice drowned out everything, and as his fingers touched the object which couldn't be described as a mere *cup*, the sun gained in potency and became more.

Where the Light had illuminated before, it wasn't doing that anymore.

The Light was now *burning*.

"PRAISE THE LIGHT!"

"**Yes, my children. Praise the Light. For we have the Grail of Ages with us, and no matter how many times they have tried to stop us, the Great Enemy has no counter to it**."

Praise the-

What was he thinking?

Damn it! The artefact...it was getting more and more difficult...to think...

"**And now, to make sure this victory will be as complete as the ones which came before it, my Champions will all drink from the Holy Chalice**."

No! NO! But his body wasn't moving according to his will anymore!

"THE GRAIL! PRAISE THE POWERS OF THE LIGHT! PRAISE LIFE! PRAISE ORDER! PRAISE WISDOM! PRAISE INNOCENCE! PRAISE UNITY! PRAISE JUDGEMENT! PRAISE FATE!"

**1 February 1995, Ca'Sforza Palace, Venice**

"**How many pulses did you record, Knight General**?"

"Five, my King."

"**Five**," Osiris repeated slowly. Millennia ago, the King of the Exchequer would have felt horror at what his brother had done.

But he was no longer a young man, and the endless succession of atrocities committed by both sides had taken its toll millennia after millennia.

Now? The Avatar of Darkness felt for a brief moment a twinge of pity for the Champions of Light who had drank from the Chalice. Knowing his brother, there was a good chance one or two had not volunteered at all for this 'blessing'.

"Your old foe, my King, was not really trying to hide what he did and-"

"**I was just musing of how the proud Archmage is committing the same mistakes over and over again, my Knight. I did not doubt for a single second your considerable talents**."

"Thank you, my King." The black-haired wizard smiled. "I have to admit I was...slightly surprised he went ahead with it so brazenly, to be honest. Releasing a magical plague from the Grail? It requires exsanguinating an unwilling Champion of the Dark in a complex ritual. I was certain Ra would not hesitate to do it. However..."

"**However, you thought that because this aspect of the Grail's powers would involve Light Champions, he would hesitate? That is underestimating the fanaticism of the Archmage, my Knight**."

"I know." The younger wizard – not that it said much given how old Osiris was – nodded. "I know. But without the Ark, or the other treasure, the magic of the Grail is going to have terrible effects upon the Champions who were tricked into drinking...*that*."

This was the problem with the incredible and abominable artefacts Ra had forged with the death of an entire civilisation. They weren't perfect, they were more...prototypes, the epitome of flawed ideas. The Ark had been created after the Grail not only to contain its power when it wasn't used, but also to support those who participated in the 'miracle'.

Without the two other artefacts, the utility of the Grail was greatly diminished.

If you weren't a Light Champion and drank from the Grail right now, it was practically guaranteed that you were going to die, and in extreme agony that could last as long as seven months.

When the Ark and the Lance were in Ra's possession, it had been used on every dedicated Light wizard or witch who could, and it had represented a formidable threat.

For drinking from the Grail turned your body into the perfect weapon. Whether you were a toddler or an old crone, the Chalice changed your body until it was an idealised version of what you could look like between eighteen and twenty years old.

And as if it wasn't enough, there was more.

The Grail unlocked all your latent magical abilities, and allowed you to master them at a rate that bordered, again, on the downright miraculous. It improved your ability to memorise magical lore and complex magical skills.

Listing all the First and most terrible of the Light Artefacts did would take hours. One of his Knights – alas long deceased – had described it as the 'ultimate cheating drink'.

Osiris had laughed, because it was incredibly true.

"I did things I am not proud of," the Knight who had been a General of the Queen of the Cities. "But I did not sacrifice my subordinates like that."

"**It is possible they will be able to live a moderately happy life once this Tournament is over**," Osiris spoke. "**The Chalice must have cost them about twenty years of life**."

"With due respect, my King, you don't truly believe that."

Osiris stayed silent for several seconds.

"**You're right, I don't**."

The Grail gave you formidable powers, but it turned you into something akin to a Phoenix: you burned brightly...but you *burned*.

And unlike the infuriating fiery bird, the Champions who drank from the Chalice didn't resurrect from the ashes once they had been consumed.

"**Anything else...Narses**?"

"The failed Lord of the Death Eaters is on his way, as you predicted. And the last reinforcements of the Army of Light, reinforced by countless mercenaries and wand-fodder, have begun to fill the barracks we aren't supposed to know about."

"The contingencies?"

"They are all ready, waiting for your order to attack the followers of the Archmage." The Knight General paused. "Will the Queen have to inform the Dark Champions of the Night and Doge Court?"

"**The Doge Court won't be informed**," Osiris said coldly. "**They have their role to play, and since at least the Champion of War can't manipulate anyone even if his life is at stake, I see no point warning them. If Romeo Malatesti succeeds, I will reward him greatly, as I do all subordinates who faithfully carry my commands**."

There was no need to elaborate what would happen if the 'Doge' and his Court failed.

"And the Night Court?"

"**I think**," Osiris declared thoughtfully "**that it has been far too long since I participated in a Carnival**."

**Author's note**: I have to admit, when I began writing this story, I didn't believe for a single second I would be able to reach chapter 100. Yet here we are.

The preparations are truly over.

The Carnival Civil War, aka the Fourth Task, begins next chapter.

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