**Chapter 101**

**Carnival Civil War**

**14 February 1995, Hostel Bridge, Castello District, Venice**

Alexandra had thought she was prepared for it.

But now that she could contemplate it from the balcony of her hostel’s room...it was impressive.

No, it was more than that.

Castello was nowhere near the entrance of the city of Venice, and yet there was an enormous crowd of disguised men and women spreading everywhere as far as her eyes could see.

It was true that the majority of the Venetian streets were narrow.

Still, Alexandra had seen Venice in January. It was nearly empty.

Now? Were the canals and the Basilica in the distance impossible to mistake for something else, one could almost believe it wasn’t the same city at all.

“Amazing, isn’t it? And they’re here all for you...”

Alexandra snorted after listening to Hermione’s words.

“Please, my dear Granger. These thousands of spectators are here for the festivities and all the spectacular events which come with it. Yes, there are many wizards in this crowd, but even they came to enjoy several days of Venetian spectacles and more.”

“You are one of the Queens of the Carnival.”

“And as long as it remains a theatrical performance in the eyes of the Magical World, that’s all I will be.” The Potter Heiress reminded her.

Some days, Alexandra hoped it would remain that way. Unfortunately, as Krum had spied with several Durmstrang and Venetian students upon the Day and Doge Courts, it wasn’t likely to stay true for much longer.

“Let’s enjoy the masks, the costumes, and everything which comes with this Carnival for as long as it lasts.” The green-eyed Ravenclaw continued before yawning in an exaggerated fashion.

“Yes, Alex. Will I be able to find you here if I need something from you?”

“Oh, no. We’re only using the rooms of this hostel until this morning. By the time the Fourth Task begins at noon, every member of my Court will have left the hostel, along with all our possessions and artefacts.”

“Really? I thought...I thought it was a good location. You can jump on nearby roofs from this balcony, after all.”

The Champion of Morrigan gave a sardonic smile to Hermione.

“I can, but that’s not the problem. We’re in a hostel, Hermione. The hours we will enter and leave are sure to attract attention, and even if we don’t, the men and women who work of this hostel are far from stupid. It may take them a few days to realise which role we play in the Carnival Civil War, but it will happen eventually. And once someone has realised the truth, well...the Light has many fanatics, and they will be ready to pay a lot of Galleons for vital information on our moves and hideouts.”

“It’s somewhat the same reason you aren’t using Ca’Sforza as a base, no?”

“Yes,” the Champion of House Ravenclaw told her friend. “Of course, the Palace of Ca’Sforza is even worse than this hostel in many regards. It is a known base of the Exchequer, so the Army of Light and their bigoted leader are already monitoring as we speak. There aren’t that many exits, whether on the neighbouring streets or the canals. And worst of all, there are many dignitaries residing there right now, all of them who can possibly be the sources for rumours and information leaks.”

The more Alexandra thought about it, the happier she was Ca’Sforza had not really been an option to use as headquarters during this Task. The Palace was a formidable magical redoubt, but the moment they took a step outside it, they would likely fight for their very lives.

“How will I contact you, then?”

“How will you contact Victor, you mean?” The Potter Heiress corrected with a large smile.

“No! Yes! I mean...you’re not funny, Alex!”

“I completely disagree with you on the matter, my dear Granger.” It was really worth it, to see Hermione in her ravishing blue costume blushing. The leader of the Night Court let a couple of seconds pass, before taking pity on her friend. “We have a system in place at a certain library we visited together.”

“Ah, the one-“

“Yes, this one. If you prove attentive, there will be messages with the precautions you were told to expect. I don’t have to tell you to respect the security protocols, do I?”

“No,” Hermione assured her, “no, that won’t be necessary. Thank you, Alex.”

The Champion of Death chuckled.

“Better you enjoy the Carnival while being reasonably safe than try to play games to join your boyfriend and get burned in the process,” she said philosophically.

“Err...yes. And speaking of Carnival, you haven’t yet donned your costume...your Majesty.”

Alexandra stuck her tongue at her friend...before giving a vocal order.

“Changelina, I want the Dark Knight costume minus the mask.”

It was if something silky enveloped her whole body, and in less time it took to say it, her non-magical clothes she had worn past breakfast disappeared, replaced by layers upon layers of black magical cloth.

“Wow, you look...err...dangerous?”

“I hope so,” Lucrezia Sforza had modelled this ‘costume’ upon a certain armour and attire of the past. The mask was directly inspired by the black helmet, and the same applied for everything from head to toe.

Watching herself in a mirror, Alexandra could verify she had taken the appearance of an obsidian knight of the medieval times, ready to go to war.

Of course, unlike the warriors of that era, her costume was made of enchanted materials woven by House Sforza, meaning Alexandra had all the protection of a first-class magical armour, but could run, and fight like she was in sport clothes.

“But.”

“But?”

“The Day Court is going to know in mere seconds you are a member of the Night Court in this costume, no?”

The Ravenclaw Champion nodded once.

“Oh, they will. The purpose of this costume is not to hide my Court’s allegiance, Hermione. It is a provocation in due form.”

The first twelve costumes’ great purpose was to hide in the crowds of the Carnival, be it when watching a theatrical performance in the public of La Fenice or when visiting sites of interest.

The Dark Knight Costume’s true goals were to have something that allowed her to fight at the top of her physical capabilities, all the while hiding her real identity. Thanks to a subtle illusion, in this costume, Alexandra appeared far taller than she truly was.

And if the Light was enraged by the sight of someone fighting with a costume very similar to the one Mordred’s guards had chosen for themselves fifteen centuries ago? Well, that was an advantage Alexandra wasn’t going to refuse.

“All is ready, then?”

“All is ready.”

“Be careful, Alex.”

And Hermione left, the Champion of the Morrigan deciding to let have the last word.

“Oh, I intend to be,” the green-eyed Champion whispered to an empty room. “I haven’t worked for hundreds of hours to screw up everything when the big challenge is here.”

As if to remind her she was ridiculous speaking alone, like that, someone knocked at the door.

“Changelina, back to my previous normal clothes, please.”

This was done once again with all due celerity, and Alexandra went to open the door.

To her modest surprise, it was an employee of the hostel, carrying...a letter.

“Your courier, *Signorina*.”

“My thanks,” Alexandra gave him a tip in Italian money, before withdrawing back to her room and closing the door.

For a moment, the Potter Heiress was worried, for this hostel had been chosen a month ago, and had not been used to sleep by any member of the Night Court until two nights ago.

But when Alexandra turned the letter to examine it more attentively, her eyes were looking at a seal in the shape of an Egyptian ankh.

Alexandra hesitated for a second...and then broke the seal and went on to read the piece of parchment waiting inside.

**14 February 1995, Santa Maria della Salute Church, Dorsoduro District, Venice**

The few streets and the small canals were almost deserted when Alexandra arrived next to the Church of Santa Maria della Salute.

If you wanted the reason to this curious lack of tourists, you had only to look on the other side of the Grand Canal. What had to be the greatest costumed parade in the history of Venice was gathering on the Plaza di San Marco and the entire district around it.

It had to be...ninety minutes before the Carnival officially began? And there were already so many spectators...

Alexandra heard the acclamations for a few seconds, before turning away and beginning to climb up the old white stairs.

The outside facade of Santa Maria della Salute, was in one word, monumental. The blocks of white stone, the statues of white, the stairs, the size of the doors, everything seemed to have been built to crush you by the sheer size of each detail.

And once inside, it was the same thing.

Everything, from the floor to the columns, looked like it had been conceived for beings far taller than any human could ever prove to be.

Plus thanks to the grey sky outside, something not helped by the absence of electrical or magical lights, the Church was almost drowned into the darkness.

Alexandra would very much thank the Morrigan for small favours that there weren’t a lot of tourists here today, if she wasn’t certain that the absence of non-magical people here and now had little to do with the Power of Death and everything to do with the Exchequer.

*He* was waiting for her in front of the choir.

Like her, he had disguised himself, and not removed his mask once entering the church – if there was a clearer way to dispel all the myths about the ‘unholy’ being unable to enter a ‘House of God’, Alexandra wasn’t aware of it.

The disguise was one of a Plague Doctor, though one of a very high quality: the mask was the colour of ivory because it was ivory, or something very much looking like it. The black clothes seemed to be soaked into the very essence of the night, but as the robe was slightly open, it revealed a waistcoat of onyx and gold that plenty of Venetian nobles would have considered acceptable at any times.

Since Alexandra knew much...she had to admit it was brilliant. *He* was obviously determined to put an end to the abomination that was the Chalice of Plagues. At the same time, there were hundreds and maybe more Plague Doctors’ costumes parading in the streets of Venice since this morning. Even assuming the Army of Light was aware their sworn enemy was hiding under such a costume, finding the correct one would be very much a legendary Task by itself.

“**Disguising yourself as one of Mordred’s guards is...audacious**,” the King of the Exchequer remarked to begin the conversation.

“Yes.” Alexandra had decided not to go the full route and present herself as Mordred herself; there was audacity, and then there was stupidity. The Army of Light had to hesitate and wonder if it was her or not, something made possible by the fact Lucrezia could play the role of body double. “But it is part of our strategy.”

“**To fill up their heads and their hearts with anger, I suppose**.” The Avatar of Darkness commented with no emotion whatsoever.

Alexandra didn’t answer.

There was a long pause.

“**It can work**.”

This was somewhat reassuring, for if it there was a Dark-affiliated being who had the experience to know what worked and what didn’t against the Light, it was the King of the Exchequer.

“Thank you. But I doubt you invited me just before the Fourth Task to...evaluate the tactics and the strategies of the Night Court.”

“**Indeed not**,” for all that she had already seen the face behind the mask, there was something...troubling about watching the Plague Doctor stare in this dark atmosphere. “**I invited you to confirm what many of your Champions and yourself already suspected in the last days. Ra activated the Grail, and five Light Champions drank from it**.”

“The tales of the Round Table found in non-magical libraries are true, then?”

“**It depends**,” for the first time there was a twinge of humour in the Avatar’s voice, “**what tales you are thinking about**.”

“I was thinking about the one which says that drinking from it is capable of healing any injury, no matter how dire the wound or incurable the disease.”

“**This one is true, unfortunately**.” Osiris admitted. “**Though there are limits. Given the current means Ra holds in his hands, any wizard or witch who will drink from the Grail while not being considered a Light Champion has high odds of dying instantly, not being cured**.”

Alexandra, behind her helm-shaped mask of Dark Knight, raised both eyebrows.

“That sounds...harsh.”

“**In older times, before we defanged the Army of Light battle after battle, the Grail could be used for all Light-sworn beings**,” the King revealed. “**Do you have any idea how frustrating it was to decimate entire armies and yet see all those you mortally wounded return to the battlefield the morning after**?”

“Frustrating is not how I would describe it...” Alexandra said quietly. “*Terrifying* is far more appropriate.”

It was a fact of life that far more people were generally wounded than killed, during a battle, unless you could rout them completely. How many times had the Exchequer been on the ascendant at the end of the day, only to be unable to finish their opponents, and lose on the second day as the wounded were coming back fresh and healthy to help the Light triumph?

“**Yes, it is that and more**.”

There was a new pause, where the Avatar of Darkness stared at her silently.

“**The Grail has seven magical abilities, one for each Light Power it was imbued with**.”

“How is it possible?” Alexandra asked. “No matter how perfect or good the Enchanter, all artefacts and relics are created from mortal materials. Whether you take a dragon’s heart or a Cockatrice’s feathers, everything has a limit.”

“**Unless**,” Osiris replied in a voice that sounded like the death of aeons, “**you create a relic which has been Summoned from the Plane of Light itself. Then all limitations are null and void**.”

Summoning. It always came back to Summoning.

No wonder that every Champion of the Dark had felt something was wrong, weeks ago.

No wonder that-

No wonder that Excalibur had felt so wrong. Oh, no.

“This wasn’t the only time Ra and the Light did it.” Alexandra didn’t bother making it a question. “Excalibur was forged the same way.”

The sword was so dangerous because technically, it wasn’t a sword at all. It was a piece of pure Light magic.

“**An astute declaration...which is completely right**.” The King of the Exchequer ‘congratulated’ her. “**Yes, Myrddin and Ra forged their weapon according to the same principles. They really wanted to kill me...Mordred and Morgane were supposed to be the test subjects, not the true target**.”

Viewed from this perspective, the statement wasn’t really a big surprise.

“There must be some drawbacks.”

“**There are. Now that Ra can’t use other artefacts to negate the flaws of the Grail, you have only to be wary of the Light Champions themselves, save the two who did not drink from the Grail**.”

Eleonora da Riva and Fleur Delacour, obviously.

“What sort of power did they gain, incidentally? No one injured them, so they didn’t drink to heal inexistent wounds.”

“**They drank and unlocked all the magical talents their bloodlines gave them the right to claim, like their Animagi transformations, and then the power of the Chalice will have made sure they are able to master said magical legacies**.”

“You’re joking,” Alexandra said appalled. The Potter Heiress knew it deep in her guts, she was nowhere near one-third of her Animagus transformation mastery. Yes, she could transform herself into a Lernaean Hydra, but it was just the first stage of Animagi magic. There was a lot to learn on this path, and it was going to take her years to discover everything, even if the Exchequer had some relevant books she could borrow.

Learning everything with one ‘drink’? This was...this was...*unfair*.

“**I assure you, young Champion**,” the ghost of a smile might have been there, behind the mask, “**I am not**.”

Alexandra thought about it very quickly. A lot of what had been said...ah, it was only about the magical talents.

“When it comes to abilities which have nothing to do with magic, there has been no improvement for the Champions.”

And sword skills – or every bladed weapon in existence, for that matter – was going to meet the same problem.

“**It is in fact worse than that for them**,” the King of the Exchequer seemed ready to chuckle, “**they have been practically given entirely new bodies, what they should be between seventeen to twenty-one years of age**. **Giving them less than a month to adapt is not sufficient...especially as they will want to explore all the aspects of their new magical abilities**.”

And among them was the Animagus transformation, which, as Alexandra knew very well, was incredibly life-changing, both in mind and body.

Okay, the situation wasn’t desperate. The Light Champions were all going to look older and be magically dangerous, but this was a sword that could maim them if they weren’t careful.

“Some of our plans...will have to be modified.”

“**By all means**,” Osiris told her, “**just remember that drinking from the Grail has not just made the five Light Champions more dangerous. It has opened the door for the Archmage of Light to brainwash them per his whims**.”

That...that was not good news.

Henri de Condé had been a rather tolerable competitor, and she had not desired his death. Alexandra had not wanted to kill Neville Longbottom either...

“You speak of five Champions. Who is the fifth?”

“**The one Ra intends to be your nemesis**,” The Avatar of Darkness replied. “**The last true descendant, in blood and oath-breaking, of the child Lancelot sired with Queen Guinevere**.”

Galahad? No, Galahad wasn’t the son of this Queen. There was another son, according to some dusty books Hogwarts kept. But the descendants in Britain were rumoured to be...oh.

Alexandra laughed.

“It’s not a very original plan.”

“**Ra does not care about originality; only about smiting the Dark until there is only the Light left**.”

This was...a good warning, admittedly. The Archmage had violated so many rules that should never have been broken...what did he care about the plagiarism or the collateral damage as long as it worked?

In the distance, from the opened doors of the Santa Maria della Salute Church, Alexandra heard the clamour of the crowd rising.

“Well...I thank you for the warning...Lord Osiris. You have given me much to think about. I...I have to go. The Carnival is about to begin.”

“**By all means. May the Dark Powers favour your deeds, Alexandra Potter**.”

**14 February 1995, a small canal away from Santa Maria della Salute Church, Dorsoduro District, Venice**

The more she knew about the Light, the more Lilian was mystified by how contradictory the Army of Light was.

Specifically, how clever some of the wizards and witches trained by the organisation founded officially by Myrddin could be...while in the breath after, the committed the most ridiculous mistakes.

Today was a particularly spectacular example of it.

Somehow – and no, the vampire who had once been called ‘Lily Potter’ didn’t how the means they achieved it – a group of three men sworn to Ra had been able to ascertain there was a meeting inside Santa Maria della Salute Church that they’d better not arrive to its conclusion.

Perhaps it was the Power of Fate guiding them once again.

Perhaps it was the complex Light Enchantment swirling around one of the Knights of the Army of Light. Lilian had not seen its likes before, but given how the magic was shaped around the mouth of one wizard, she was going to bet on an old Mesopotamian piece of magic.

Anyway, the three followers of the Archmage were here.

They waited on the bridge which was one of the rare ways to access or leave the island’s edge where the colossal Venetian Church had been built.

They had a perfect view of Santa Maria’s opened gate, and the chalk they expended upon the bridge preparing something that was extremely similar to a part-Enchantment, part-Ritual her Mistress had taught her to memorise a year ago. The name of this attack was the Storm’s Wrath. It was extremely difficult to cast. It required several conditions, both in the planet’s alignments and the tides, that it was quite impressive the Knights had been able to calculate they would be able to use it today.

Yes, when Lilian acknowledged their cleverness, it was not a vain judgement. What they had done in the last minutes must have required years of training from the Army of Light’s old guard, in order to obtain such competent wizards.

“It seems,” the red-haired Vampiri Romani sighed, “that their cleverness doesn’t extend further than their magical skills.”

Were the Knights so stupid to think the King of the Exchequer was going to come here without a Knight or two and many Pawns to act as a security force? Were they that foolish to entertain the idea the Queen would let her daughter, the irreplaceable Champion of Death, undefended and vulnerable while Lord Osiris had invited her?

Apparently, they were.

“Glacius Horribilis!”

Water had never been her element, but with the enormous masses of it that were right next to her targets, it was a child’s game to find the resources to shape and transform it into ice.

With her Ice Curse, it was a gigantic lion of ice which materialised, and as she had suspected, two out of three of Ra’s lackeys had focused their minds upon the Storm’s Wrath preparations and ignored everything else – not a bad idea, given how agonising their end would be if they made a mistake – and let the third member of their group play the role of sentinel.

Which was why the man in question was the first to have claws of ice ravaging his throat and his head.

The other two Knights of the Army of Light realised something had gone wrong. It could hardly be otherwise as they were sprayed by the blood of their friend and one saw the severed arm still holding the magical wand land centimetres away from his knees.

One tried to scream. The other, certainly more experienced, immediately abandoned the ritual and tried to take his wand from the holster tied to his belt.

Her lion of ice did not give them a chance to do more than that. Several more strikes of ice claws and an enormous spike in the chest later, where there had been three living fools of the Army of Light before, there were now three corpses.

Three corpses and a small pool of blood, which was growing larger by the second.

And the smell of the blood shed...Lilian had thought that having a meal before taking up her duties would have been sufficient, but...it wasn’t.

Blood, there was blood everywhere...and the young vampire found it good. She wanted to lick it, she wanted to-

A hand slapped her.

The gesture was hardly painful for her, evidently, Vampiri Romani could survive wounds that would kill mortal wizards by the thousands, but it brutally interrupted her rising bloodlust.

“Control yourself,” Horace Slughorn said.

“It is...difficult.”

Her old Potions mentor looked at her with an expression she was intimately familiar with: the one when Lilian answered his question by another question, because the red-haired vampire knew very well the conversation was taking a turn she didn’t like.

“That’s why I advised you to drown them, not create...this messy situation.” Slughorn lectured her. “It would have been more discreet too. These streets are empty for now, but they won’t be for long. What we can afford at this hour is not going to be allowed the moment the crowds stop gathering around the Piazza di San Marco.”

“I know,” the redhead Apprentice Enchantress grimaced while looking away from the scene of murder. A second later she stopped breathing and smelling, which made the bloodlust recede. It also helped that the Potions Master had thrown several Potions onto it, plus a large-scale illusion to make it seem nothing out of the ordinary had happened. “I am sorry.”

“You’re strong and talented, but you have much to learn,” a faint smile returned to Slughorn’s lips. “I am going to clean up the mess. Your daughter is leaving the church and walking towards the gondolas. Watch over her while she’s crossing the Grand Canal.”

“With pleasure,” the Apprentice of Knight Teacher said before running away from the bloodbath.

**14 February 1995, Dorsoduro District, Venice**

When Alexandra left the church behind her, the streets near Santa Maria were just as empty as they had been when she entered it.

As if to make the greatest difference possible, the other side, the one where the Piazza di San Marco and the Doge Palace were waiting, seemed to be crowded with tens of thousands. The ruckus made by the disguised spectators and everyone who had booked for the festival it promised to be...it was enormous, even so far away.

Alexandra watched it for a few seconds...and it was the time it took for a gondola to seemingly emerge from nowhere, with Lyudmila Romanov controlling magically the traditional Venetian boat.

Obviously, the Dark Queen had arrived in costume.

Much like Alexandra’s costume, it was not a subtle disguise at all. Alexandra was a Dark Knight; black plate, black mask-helmet, black boots.

The Tsar’s daughter had chosen the ‘professional assassin’ theme.

Her costume was as tight upon her body as the ‘Arlequina’ one, but few would likely have the urge to laugh looking at it. Most of the costume alternated between shades of dark purple and black, and the mask was a spectacular and frightening domino mask creation of purple promising death. There were no other great ornaments, nothing like golden chains, military medals, or feathers of exotic birds; the costumes was sufficient onto itself to spread over its surroundings an atmosphere of extreme danger.

“Well?”

“Raido,” Alexandra cast a Rune evocation upon their transport before jumping, so that neither the Dark Queen nor she needed to be concerned about the gondola’s sailing for a few minutes. “Eleonora was ready?”

“She left before the Succubus,” the female Champion of Chaos answered. “And?”

Alexandra rolled her eyes. One thing that could be said about the Dark Queen was that when she had her attention on a certain subject, it was nearly impossible to change the direction of a conversation.

“You were right. It was about the Grail. Specifically, the Archmage literally poured one near-miracle for each Power the Light has.”

“Ha!” The Dark Queen replied, and since the mask of gold did not cover her mouth, a vindictive smile could be seen. “I knew it!”

“And how did you know in the first place, pray tell?”

Lyudmila Romanov passed one hand into her purple-black dyed hair.

“The Chalice of Plagues, Death. It is something backed by the Power of Judgement, I’m ready to bet half of my money on it.”

Said like that, evidently...Lyudmila Romanov was almost certainly right. Unleashing a plague couldn’t be something Life would bless, and the less said about Innocence, the better. The Potter Heiress couldn’t see how dying from a disease could give you Wisdom, and if there was Unity to be found with the Chalice of Plagues’ power, it was only in death. And it was not Order to kill everyone at the same time.

“All right, I agree with you. That said, it seems that for the first days of the Fourth Task, it is another ‘near-miracle’ of the Grail which is going to be our biggest headache. Five Light Champions have drunk from the Grail, and apparently this has allowed them to unlock and master all the latent magical abilities their bloodlines were famous for.”

“That...that is really going to be a problem.” The Durmstrang Champion reacted. “They must have broken a lot of rules to do that, however.”

“And how will the Judges check, Chaos?” the Ravenclaw Champion replied neutrally. “Longbottom and the fifth Champion are the only ones susceptible to age spectacularly; the other three were seventeen or close to it, so the changes shouldn’t be that spectacular. As a result, it’s only some of their magical skills which will improve, and that’s not something easy to verify.”

“I see...” Lyudmila Romanov in a thoughtful mood was not a reassuring thing. Oh no, it wasn’t a reassuring thing at all. “It can’t be Order. I saw several of those morons from afar. I didn’t feel the kind of revulsion I should.”

“That and mastering your magical abilities when you have done nothing to practise them in the first place is not exactly orderly,” the Potter Heiress commented drily. “It must be Wisdom or Unity.”

“Indeed.”

There were between five and ten second of silence as their gondola sailed slowly towards the Plaza di San Marco and its tumult announcing the prelude of the Carnival.

“You hate it like I do.”

There was no need to ask what the Dark Queen referred to.

“Yes,” Alexandra admitted. “I won’t deny I have been granted great boons by the Morrigan. I am powerful, far more than any witch of my age should be. But damn it. Even after I was granted my Animagus form or the ability to wield army-killer lightning spells, I had to work for them! The hours I didn’t need to sleep, I spent them to learn thousands of Runes. I practised Charms until I could recite some books in my sleep. I was beaten like a novice by my Head of House in spectacular duels so that I could improve slowly. I fought battles which left me completely exhausted. And Ra just hands the Light Champions everything? No effort required. No understanding of the arts of magic demanded. Click your fingers, and thank the Light for the miracle.”

Alexandra had to stop herself, for the Hydra’s anger was pouring out of her in waves.

“Of course, they will be brainwashed by the Archmage in return.” The Champion of the Morrigan said coldly.

“But from the perspective of the Archmage, it is an advantage, not a drawback.”

“Exactly,” Alexandra whispered before clearing her throat. “So yes, I am really beginning to hate them, and everything they stand for. I hate them, because thanks to them, the philosophy of ‘the end always justifies the means’ championed by Lucrezia Sforza is not just an option, it is *necessary*.”

The Potter took a deep breath.

“Still, there is good news. I was granted the confirmation that wielding a sword is not something the Grail can help you with.”

And it also explained why Arthur had lost at Camlann. Assuming the son of Uther had been a Squib and the Grail had somehow allowed him to wield magic instantaneously, this didn’t solve anything when it came to Excalibur.

The sword was one of the most potent artefacts to ever be forged, as it was a Summon of Light.

But if you were a poor and unskilled swordsman, an elite opponent has his...or in Mordred’s case, her chances.

“That’s good news, yes.” Lyudmila Romanov said, her purple mask giving her a very threatening appearance as a ray of sun illuminated the cloudy morning of Venice. “Though I will also have to plan for the elimination of all Light Champions...just in case, my Queen.”

Alexandra slightly inclined her head and glared.

“Oh? Ah! All the Light Champions minus Eleonora da Riva...Night Queen.” A dark chuckle escaped the lips of the Durmstrang Champion. “You have grown fond of her, didn’t you?”

“The Champion of Innocence has been an excellent costume-maker, and has upheld the terms we agreed upon. As long as it is the case, I will be very, very angry if someone of our Court tries to kill her.”

“And if the ‘someone’ is not of the Night Court?”

“Then,” Alexandra replied seriously, “as long as they aren’t under the Imperius or some form of mind-control we can dispel, I suppose the culprits will have to be dealt with permanently.”

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

Neville had thought he was prepared for the Carnival Civil War.

The Boy-Who-Lived felt his true destiny had been fulfilled.

Thanks to the Grail, he had mastered skills in mere days. The Archmage had been right. Without it, it would have taken him years...and the Dark would likely have won.

But the Grail existed, and Neville felt now the Light burn inside his chest.

The objections of the Day Court had finally been silenced, his head filled with amazing plans, and finally, the other Champions had accepted his authority.

And yet, as he entered the Plaza di San Marco, Neville felt overwhelmed.

There had to be...how could so many people stand in the same location? Yes, there must have been more people at the final of the Quidditch World Cup...but this had been a stadium prepared for it years in advance, and wizards and witches had quickly left after the game was over.

Many of the disguised spectators who had come today weren’t wizards or witches. Neville couldn’t say how he knew, but it was a truth he didn’t doubt. Thousands were missing something...and his instinct was telling him that the ‘something’ was *magic*.

Past the instant of surprise, the Champion of House Gryffindor was able to navigate in the middle of this crowd. The Muggle attractions over their heads were of an enormous help: according to the Venetians, the Queen of the Carnival – not Potter, a girl chosen in a beauty contest – would descend from the top of a nearby tower and once she landed on the pavement of San Marco, the Carnival would truly begin. At least they distracted quantity of Muggles and proper Wizards today.

But as their progression remained extremely slow and clumsy, Neville’s doubts didn’t vanish. All around him was a multitude of colours. The masks and the costumes were so different...and they varied in style and materials.

Some Muggles had come dressed as parodies of witches, of all things! And many Wizards had come dressed as aristocrats of the eighteenth century, with the ridiculous fans and wigs that Neville rarely saw before outside of House Longbottom’s painting gallery.

Neville recognised a few Hogwarts students...mainly those who were removing their masks to have a drink or eat something. The rest? They were all foreigners to his senses. Even his sense of smell, which had greatly increased in the last month, was utterly useless here. The famous Plaza of Venice had so many odours! It felt as if all the women had drunk perfume before donning their costumes!

It was so easy to get distracted...but Neville arrived in time before the Judges, who had formed a neat line in front of the Basilica’s gates.

Cedric to his left, Frode to his right, the Day King advanced...and realised really quickly that no one of the Night Court was present.

The same couldn’t be said of the Doge Court, obviously. Someone, most likely Malatesti, had dressed his Guards in a Venetian costume imitating the armours and the capes of the Legionnaires of Roman Antiquity. Except they weren’t red-coloured, but blue, for a mysterious reason.

Of Fleur Delacour and Poliakov, there was no sign, but the presence of Malatesti was such Neville did not think for many seconds about them. Not when the Dark Champion of War had come dressed like a King, his golden armour being so shiny it nearly illuminated by itself the grey day of Venice.

Neville had decided to come in an assured white costume imitating the White King of chess, something that would, according to the Archmage’s advice, enrage the Enemy.

But Malatesti’s disguise was so outrageous...was it even a disguise, really, when everyone knew who was hiding behind the mask of bronze and gold?

Everything was outrageous in the appearance of the ‘Doge’. The cap in white ermine fur coexisted with bright feathers of some parrot, and the impeccably polished black boots completed a large and baggy...thing that could not be qualified of trousers.

An extravagant sceptre shaped like a mermaid sealed the ridiculousness of this ‘costume’.

 “Where is the Night Court?” Cedric Diggory whispered. “I don’t like that at all.”

It was...Neville wasn’t worried, but he didn’t understand.

Where was the Night Court? They were supposed to be here. The rules had said to come here, before the official beginning of the Fourth Task. It wouldn’t change anything in the end, the Day Court had the most efficient Tracking Rituals and Charms in existence, but still...hunting them across Venice was going to be incredibly complicated, if they didn’t even have a clue...

“Don’t worry,” Frode replied. “Their rapiers are here. They will be forced to answer the Judges’ invitation...unless they want to forfeit one of their foci before the Task even truly begins.”

But the minutes passed...and no one of the Night Court came.

The rapiers were lined up behind the Judges, and the Boy-Who-Lived could read up the names on the ribbons tied up to the swords, thus it was extremely easy to confirm that yes, those were the weapons of the Night Court next to the Day’s.

Finally the Transylvanian Vampire – one which now smelled like carrion to Neville’s senses – stepped forwards.

“Who will represent the Night Court?” His voice thundered, and the Gryffindor Champion knew immediately this wasn’t the Muggle device he was carrying in his hand which was responsible...but the Statute had to be enforced, one way or another.

The crowd all around them burst into excited whispers.

“Who will represent the Night Court?” The Judge asked for a second time when it was clear there would be no answer.

“**I will**.”

The Champion of Fate shivered, for suddenly, the temperature in the Plaza di San Marco felt as if several Dementors had arrived.

And the voice...Neville didn’t know the voice, but for some reason Fate seemed to try to tell something.

The thousands of spectators moved in precipitation, and the result was as if the enormous crowd was parting before some terrifying character.

It wasn’t a far-fetched truth, not when the Boy-Who-Lived saw the costume for the first time.

It was a knight of evil. Most of the Champions of the Day had chosen *pure* colours, either white or something that could show they were *Good*.

But this Champion of the Night had clearly gone for the opposite tactic.

Black cape, black armour, black mask, black boots.

If there was something which wasn’t black, Neville hadn’t the slightest idea what it was.

The disguise seemed to spread the darkness with each step.

The clothes were ones belonging to a knight of Evil.

It was a costume prepared to remind them of the darkness and an age where Dark Lords thrived, an age fortunately long gone.

But the worst part was that Neville couldn’t discern who was wearing it. It was almost certainly a woman, the costumed individual simply didn’t have the muscles and the shoulders of Krum...but that left all the other Champions of the Night.

“The Jury acknowledges the representative of the Night Court.”

The silence which had begun dominating the Plaza was impressive...and frightening.

“Hey! Wait a minute! Where are the Champions of the Night Court?”

The Evil Knight laughed.

Neville didn’t know how it was done, but it was as if a cold shower had been poured above everyone’s heads.

“**Do not worry, oh Champion of the Day**,” the tenebrous being proclaimed in reaction to Frode Falk’s question, “**they are here, in this very crowd. They are watching you. You will meet them soon.** **Very soon**.”

At last, the Champion of the Night Court stopped walking towards them.

“Isn’t it a bit irregular?” Romeo Malatesti intervened, the sound of his voice confirming the bastards found the entire scene incredibly amusing. “We are all here, assembled, and you...well, you are an army of one.”

“**My dear Doge**,” the other Dark Champion – whoever was hiding under this costume, Neville was certain no one but a Champion of the Dark would risk donning that evil-themed attire – was mocking them. “**The rules required all of us to be present today, within the limits of the Plaza di San Marco. The rules, should you have decided to go after your Tournament Clue, insisted only one of the Champions had to answer when the Head Judge would ask for a representative for each Court. No one said anything about needing the entire Court**. **And if you have any doubt...ask our honourable Judge**.”

Merlin’s beard! Did it mean...oh, no. No!

They had waited for long minutes, two Courts entirely exposed to thousands of spectators...and no doubt the eyes of every member of the Night Court!

“The representative of the Night Court is correct, I’m afraid.” The Transylvanian Judge confirmed.

Malatesti...exploded in laughter. Neville and most of the Day Court glared at him...something that seemed to amuse the ‘Doge’ in a hysterical manner.

“That was a good trick!” The Dark Champion who thought summoning Sobek into existence was a good idea finally stopped howling in laughter after a good minute. “Tell me, what must we call you, friend?”

“**I am the Dark Knight**.”

Fireworks exploded above their heads, but what came out was not light, but darkness, utter darkness.

There were screams of panic...but fortunately, the time of utter obscurity didn’t last.

But when their visibility was restored, the ‘Dark Knight’ had a rapier in her black scabbard.

And a short glance was enough to confirm that yes, in a couple of seconds, all the rapiers of the Night Court had gone missing.

“You aren’t respecting the protocol!” Neville protested loudly. “You have to abide per the rules!”

“**Ah, but if it isn’t the glorious Day King**,” the female Dark Knight coldly declared, these simple words making Neville freeze in alarm. “**Do you want to hear a secret, Champion of the Sun and the Light? Unlike you, I have read the rules. Unlike you, *I know what I can get away with***.”

As none of the Judges or their assistants came forwards to tell him she was wrong, the damned soul was likely right.

“**I am the Dark Knight**.” All spectators had grown silent, and the voice was echoing under the grey skies of February in Venice. “**And I hate the Day**.”

Whatever enchantment had been used, sparkles of black magic seemed to explode near the feet of the representative of the Night Court.

“**They will tell you, people of Venice, that they are the heroes. They will claim that they are your saviours. They will try to rally you to your banners. Join us, they will tell you, so that they will be an eternal cycle of happy endings**.”

With each word, Neville was sure that this was no mere monologue prepared to make sure the spectators believed it was all a funny competition.

No, the Dark Knight was truly challenging the Light, here and now.

“**They are lying to you**.” The tenebrous Knight continued darkly. “**The Light has grown into a holy tyranny that knows no bounds. Their laws will strangle you, until you can no longer raise your head in protest. All their pretty rules will be discarded when they feel it is necessary, for after all, aren’t they the Side of Good?**”

“The Dark is selfishness incarnate!” Frode Falk shouted back.

Neville knew the moment the words had left the lips of his fellow Champion that it was a mistake.

“**If selfishness means that we aren’t willing to bleed upon the altars of the Light, yes, we are selfish!**” The Dark Knight admitted with pride. “**If treason means rising up against your odious decrees, then we are all rebels! If being of the Dark means not having to endure the torments of the Day’s flames, then we will stand against the Day!**”

And to the Champion of Fate, many spectators began to cheer and give a thunderous applause to the Dark Knight.

Of course, it was all part of the Carnival festivities for them, but-

“**We will be everywhere and nowhere on the ten islands where this Civil War is taking place. We will be in the ballrooms and the dark streets. We will be under the bridges and the gondolas. We will whisper the words of the first darkness. We are the Night Court. And this is our war**.”

New fireworks exploded, and for five more seconds, there was this impenetrable darkness.

But this time, when it ended, the Dark Knight was nowhere to be seen.

**14 February 1995, Museo Correr, San Marco District, Venice**

The Museo Correr was giving anyone wishing to look from its windows a spectacular view of the Basilica di San Marco and the place of the same name.

It was incredibly close to the Light Champions and all the participants of the Carnival Civil War assembled here.

And best of all, the rules had mentioned it was part of the Plaza di San Marco...meaning all the Night Court was perfectly within its rights to wait for the beginning of the Fourth Task here.

As a result, when Alexandra arrived after teleporting away, all the Champions were waiting for her in the room in a museum room which was technically part of the Napoleon wing.

“This was a superb speech, my Queen,” Lucrezia Sforza congratulated her as Alexandra shifted her costume of Dark Knight to her ‘Princess of Light’ disguise. “May I ask how it was done?”

The Succubus had come in a costume of nun. Worse, it was likely a costume of Light nun. If that wasn’t an enormous insult to Ra and his fanatics, Alexandra didn’t know what it was.

“The fireworks were filled with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder,” Alexandra admitted.

“And the voice? For a moment, it sounded like the Old Fossil had invited himself in the Plaza...” Naturally, Lyudmila’s intervention provoked a large amount of gritted teeth from a certain Champion of Lust.

“A basic Enchantment named the Voice of the Abyss,” the Potter Heiress answered promptly before those two went to bickering again. “Despite the enrapturing name, it is fairly unthreatening, but offers some interesting voice-altering abilities.”

“Enchanting already at your age?” Ambre de Courtois noted. “It is most impressive.”

“I’m just beginning,” Alexandra noted humbly...and honestly. After all, the basic Enchantments she could cast without blowing something up spectacularly could be counted on both hands with fingers to spare.

“No, Ambre is right, this is extremely good for your age,” Eleonora disagreed. “And you seem to have destabilised the Day and Doge Courts. They’re still standing here frozen listening to the Judges’ explaining the rules.”

“On this front, I totally agree,” the Champion playing the role of Night Queen answered. “And I will say that slamming in their faces that we were able to read the rules for days, giving us a neat advantage before the Carnival officially began, has been a really cheap victory scored inside the Day’s heads.”

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to have worked on Malatesti. Alexandra...wasn’t really surprised. The Champion of Ares often behaved like an imbecile, but he loved being challenged.

“What do we do know?” The French witch wondered out loud. “Many costumes of the Day Court have proven to be useless in mere minutes. They certainly will try to rush back to their palace-headquarters the moment they are allowed to leave the Plaza di San Marco. Do we spread rumours that we have been seen somewhere in Murano or Burano, and enjoy watching them racing to the four corners of the Venetian Lagoon?”

“It would be amusing,” Viktor Krum said in a very accented French, “but I don’t think it is wise. We know where the Day Court is going to retreat to. And by a curious turn of circumstance, I have, thanks to our Warlocks’ assistance, a good idea where the first of the Aquamarine Keys is being hidden. And it is very close to Ca’Luce.”

“How ‘close’ are we speaking about?” Alexandra asked the Champion playing the role of her Master of Spies.

“Unless I’m gravely mistaken, the location of the first Aquamarine Key is the market near the Rialto Bridge.”

Despite her best effort, Alexandra needed a few seconds to place the location upon her mental map of the city, but place it she did.

And when she did, the Basilisk Slayer wasn’t happy.

“Please tell me you’re joking, Krum.”

“I am not...my Queen.”

Alexandra glared at Hermione’s boyfriend.

“This market is so close that within sixty seconds of any Court involvement, it will be filled with a significant number of Champions, Warlocks, and Guards of the Day Court.”

“Exactly,” Viktor Krum answered with an impressive amount of assurance. “They are *too close*. They have been shaken by your display of power here. They will react in force, wanting to score a quick and easy victory.”

Lucrezia Sforza giggled.

“My, my, Viktor Krum. And here I thought I was the audacious one.” The smile stayed on the lips of the Succubus hidden behind a virginal white costume. “There’s a little problem with your scenario, though. For the reaction to be the one we wants, the Dark Knight has to come in person to this market. The Day is ignorant of all the other costumes we display here. And for one, I am reluctant to risk our Queen in the first minutes of the Fourth Task.”

“The first skeletons will be ready within the hour, though,” the Dark Queen of Durmstrang in her assassin costume suggested. “Artificer Vulchanova told me they could assemble the first four within that time limit, at least. If we can give the ‘Dark Knight’ such protections, maybe it can work.”

“Your faith in my abilities is so reassuring,” Alexandra commented. “Personally, I am not so convinced. Two or three Champions, I am confident I can handle them. Right at the moment, it’s clear none of them have learned how to move through a crowd. And the sheer arrogance they were breathing on the Plaza di San Marco is clearly indicative, in my opinion, that they have not trained with rapiers against fencing experts.”

If they had and duelled against the Day equivalent of Professor Flitwick, they wouldn’t be so confident watching the range of rapiers arrayed in front of the Basilica’s entrance.

“Four skeletons will be a big help. But even with them, I can’t hold for more than a few seconds against half of the Day Court. And the Rialto Bridge can’t serve as an easy road of escape. I would love to use it, really, but even with the morons they have, I am confident one or two will think of erecting some barriers plus pushing hundreds of spectators towards me, so that I can’t move in this direction.”

“Our Queen has a point, Krum.” Lucrezia feigned to inspect her nails, and Alexandra promised herself to tell the Succubus to stop that, otherwise she would be easily recognised, even in the middle of a crowd. “It is a very big risk, and while we agreed to adopt an aggressive posture to destabilise our opponents, there’s a difference between aggressiveness and suicidal behaviour.”

“Would you be willing to at least listen to my plan?” The Bulgarian Seeker asked, as an angel appeared at the top of the Campanile, and prepared to open the Fourth Task of the Tournament. The Queen of the beauty contest was ready to play her part for the grand opening ceremony...and so, in a few minutes, would be all the Courts.

“You have,” Alexandra said magnanimously, “until the Judges ask us to disperse.”

**14 February 1995, Mercati di Rialto, San Polo District, Venice**

As long as you weren’t too attentive, the spectacle of the Mercati di Rialto – the ‘official’ name for this Venetian market – might seem authentic.

It was situated right next to the Grand Canal, under the arches of a red-orange building that felt more like a museum than what was appropriate for a market.

It was situated quite close to many high-class shops, though those were in nearby streets, not right on the Grand Canal.

And the market was selling fishes, of course.

In reality, this illusion of normalcy was...well, just that, an illusion.

If the market had been really selling fresh fish, it would have been an unbearable temptation for her, being a Hydra Animagus.

As it was, the actors in charge of the performance had used some Charm which imitated the smell of fish, but for her nose, it was not the real deal.

Alexandra could give the Judges and those who had thought of this not-so-little spectacle her compliments, though.

It was a wonderful way to make sure the Champions had studied Venice before this Task’s beginning.

The Potter Heiress knew the market in this location was perfectly normal; but the hour very much wasn’t.

The fish market, Alexandra had been informed by Eleonora weeks ago, was only taking place in the morning. The official closure hour was eleven in the morning, though it quite often ended before that; unlike other products, fishes, crustaceans, and other products of the sea couldn’t stay hours on a market stand, no matter how much ice you piled up to keep them fresh.

Since it was around two in the afternoon now, the market was definitely part of the Fourth Task.

Obviously, the ‘fishes’ were not real fishes.

Alexandra had used the sense of smell and the eyes of the Lernaean Hydra, and as best as she could tell, someone had combined fish scales, and some cheap Potion ingredients plus a few Potions and preserving Charms, and given it the shape and the weight of average-looking fishes.

Or maybe not so average, certain fishes were truly enormous, and Alexandra was convinced you couldn’t fish those in the Venetian lagoon.

Why this focus on the fishes, one might ask?

Well, this wasn’t because Alexandra wanted to eat them, thank you very much.

Technically she could, Lernaean Hydras had a stomach capable of digesting nearly everything...but the Ravenclaw Champion doubted that magical fish-shaped ‘recipe’ would taste very good.

And no, Alexandra wasn’t going to do it, in the end.

One reason was because she had already eaten a far tastier tuna sandwich before coming to the Mercati di Rialto.

The other reason, and the most important one, was the realisation the Tournament Keys all Courts were searching were there.

Yes, the Keys were hidden inside the fake fishes.

“Krum was wrong,” the Basilisk Slayer hissed to Eleonora da Riva.

“How so?”

“Between my eyes and the Charms, there are eight Keys in this Fish Market. All of them are inside ‘fishes’ of varying sizes.”

“That’s...that’s going to be a problem.” The Champion of Innocence acknowledged after a few seconds of surprise. “Do we go for the ‘Sheer Audacity’ Scenario?”

Alexandra sighed. The moment Krum had proposed it, she had known it was going to be used, sooner or later...and it appeared it was going to be ‘sooner’.

“Yes, yes I do.” Alexandra grimaced internally before shaking off the thought. They had prepared as best as they could, now it was time to trust the rest of the Night Court...it wasn’t like they had any reason to see her fail today, after all. “Leave as fast as you can, please. The moment I begin to play my performance, all hell is going to break loose...maybe literally.”

“As you wish,” Eleonora da Riva said curtly. “Are you sure you don’t want a few Ducats to buy the fishes?”

Alexandra chuckled.

“I have no intention to pay for them, my dear Innocence.”

“Do I want to know what sort of insane scheme that you suddenly conjured inside your head?”

“Probably not,” Alexandra shook her head ironically. “Now go!”

Alexandra closed her eyes for a few seconds, continuing to walk and turning a corner.

In many ways, this was a theatrical performance.

The Potter Heiress had to change the way she walked, the way she ran, the way she inclined her head, the way she smiled...and even the way she spoke.

One of the last two darkness-creating fireworks was fired, and as the crowd gasped when obscurity fell, Alexandra was ready.

“Changelina, the Dark Knight costume, now!”

There was a window of five seconds, give it or take it, and missing it would be extremely inconvenient.

Fortunately, Fred and George were prankster-geniuses, and like every time today, the fireworks fulfilled their task marvellously.

When the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder ceased to darken the entrance of the Mercati di Rialto, Alexandra was ready.

“**Proud citizens of Venice!**” the Dark Knight she was playing the role of shouted. “**You have been deceived! The Day King is NOT your legitimate sovereign!**”

If that wasn’t enough to attract the attention of the two other Courts, Alexandra didn’t know what would be required to do the job...

**14 February 1995, Mercati di Rialto and Rialto Bridge, San Polo District, Venice**

Cedric had thought Eurig had turned mad when his fellow Hufflepuff informed him the Dark Knight had been sighted mere hundreds of metres away from their headquarters.

Oh yes, there still were some idiots among the Day Court who believed the Night and the Doge didn’t know which location they were using as a base. Cedric hadn’t called them morons, but he thought it very much.

The very fact that the Day hadn’t been able to catch a single spy red-handed in the weeks before the Tournament meant, in his modest opinion, that the Night and the Doge had gotten away with it, or that they had already known from other sources Ca’Luce was their key redoubt.

The Night Court had to know. It was unimaginable to think Lucrezia Sforza, a Venetian witch didn’t know, or if she was aware of it, that she wouldn’t tell Potter and all the other Night Champions.

And yet, the Dark Knight, a female witch for sure – Krum was way too recognisable, illusion or no illusion – was here.

In front of an assembly of fishermen and spectators, the Dark Knight was thunderously proclaiming his presence to all.

“Cedric, it’s a trap.”

“Of course it’s a trap!” The oldest of the Hogwarts Champions retorted. “But we can’t let the ‘Dark Knight get away again today, not when we don’t even know a single bloody costume of the other Night Champions!”

The assumption the ‘servants of the Night Queen’ would be easy to distinguish from the rest of the crowd had been just that, an assumption, backed by absolutely no facts whatsoever.

And now there was that...

“**And I say**,” the Dark Knight spoke, sometimes forced to pause by loud cheers coming from the crowd, “**that strange women lying in ponds are no basis for a system of government! Supreme power can’t derive from some farcical aquatic ceremony!**”

Cedric didn’t know why the crowd went wild hearing this nonsense, and he didn’t care.

Not when Frode Falk and Giovanni Ruspoli had just caught up with him.

Suddenly, what little control he had upon the situation was getting ridiculously thin...

“Does executive power derive from a mandate of the masses, in your opinion?” A spectator dressed like a Plague Doctor asked the Dark Knight.

“ARREST THE DARK KNIGHT! FORMATION SPEAR THREE!” Falk roared, interrupting the theatrical display.

Rapiers were unsheathed, and at last six or seven members of the Day Court charged, the spectators moving away in hurry, sometimes leaning against the wall, given that the Rialto Bridge and the streets nearby, while large by Venetian standards, were ultimately rather narrow, as thousands of costumes spectators were arriving per minute to watch the new episode of the Carnival Civil War.

“**The mandate of the masses is one pillar**.” Cedric had decided not to rush in, and his bad feeling increased as their opponent showed no concern whatsoever and did not even bother drawing the rapier whose scabbard was half-hidden on his back by his black cape and the Peruvian Powder coating part of the costume. “**And the other is based on lies and violence!”**

“SURRENDER AND YOU WILL BE SPARED!”

For all answer, the Dark Knight took one step to the right and grabbed...a huge swordfish?

“Hey!” One of the fishermen barked in what felt like a theatrical outburst. “And my Ducats?”

“**Fighting tyranny can be an expensive and ruinous affair**,” the Dark Knight unhelpfully said. “**I am sure the Day Court will generously reimburse you when**-“

Falk attacked. In the chaos the other Day Champion had provoked, Cedric wasn’t able to see who was next to him, but that didn’t matter when...what?

The rapier of Falk was stopped well before striking the Dark Knight...the blame lying to the ‘nose’ of the huge swordfish, which had blocked the enchanted metal like a true rapier should have.

“**This was not chivalrous**,” the Dark Knight remarked in a calm voice, and Cedric knew instinctively it was a sure method to enrage Falk and all the friends of the Durmstrang Champion. “**And as I said, you will contribute**.”

Falk had become incredibly fast in the last weeks. The black-costumed Champion was far faster. There was a sort of magical sparkling around the sleeves, and a second later the purse of the Day Champion was banished in the direction of the dispossessed fisherman – recognisable for his vivid blue-white sailor costume – who caught it like a Seeker.

“**Will it be enough for my fish purchases, good Sir?”** The Dark Knight kept his swordfish locked with Falk’s rapier, all the while pushing the crowd forwards around him, making impossible for the other members of the Day Court to use their blades or any magic whatsoever.

“That will be enough for five fishes and not a single more!”

“**You drive hard bargains**.”

“GIVE ME BACK MY PURSE!” Falk screamed.

A second later, he was disarmed, his rapier falling impotently on the pavement.

Cedric froze. At different corners of the fish market, four dark silhouettes of red and black had taken position, and were throwing fireworks and other artificers’ devices.

He had been right; the entire affair had been a trap. Of course the Night Court had not decided to let one of its Champions go on such a near-suicidal adventure on his own.

“Kill me and you will be cursed with-“

SLAP!

The Dark Knight had changed its posture in one second, and Falk’s face was forcefully slapped by the swordfish’s mass.

The crowd loved it. Disguised men and women, be they wizards or not, voiced their acclamations and support.

“I will destroy you for that-“

SLAP!

“Fate will bring you down and your humiliation will-“

SLAP!

“What the hell is happening, Cedric?”

And here, Neville Longbottom arrived...before the Third Task, it might have been a sign sanity would return.

These days? It wasn’t at all good news.

“Falk appears to get slapped...a lot...by a big swordfish!” It was hard to utter the words without giggling...and Cedric wasn’t sure he was very successful.

“But that’s the Dark Knight! STOP THAT! EVERYONE ARREST THE NIGHT COURT! SHIELD TWO! DRAW THE RAPIERS!”

Well, kingly orders were orders he couldn’t disobey without point penalties, and-

“You are trapped!” Falk announced after getting once more slapped, though this time one of the Guards shared the swordfish humiliation.

“**Am I?”** The Dark Knight commented sarcastically. “**Ah, I suppose...you are**.”

And with a move that was extremely reminiscent of a prey bird, the Dark Knight grabbed by their red-gold hoods Falk and another of his accomplices.

And then he directly threw them in the Grand Canal!

Suddenly, the Hufflepuff Champion recognised why the slapping had taken place: it had been to get closer to the water and push the court members of the Day in it, not just to have some amusement.

And that meant...

“DON’T GET CLOSE!” Cedric shouted. “I DON’T KNOW WHAT SHE PLANNED, BUT DON’T-“

But it was too late. Once again, the crowd dispersed before the Day Champions, and as Ruspoli and others charged, suddenly the pavement and the entire surrounding area changed appearance and was covered into a slippery white substance.

There was no need to ask what it did: the five members of the Day Court were propelled at a phenomenal speed – so fast Cedric had no doubt there was some magic at play there.

Giovanni Ruspoli and the others clearly didn’t control their moves anymore...and the Grand Canal was right in front of them.

Cedric closed his eyes and try not to chuckle loudly.

When he reopened them, there were many, many familiar red-coloured masks and costumed individuals taking a bath in the Canal...and the entire Day Court was akin to a bunch of novices trying to figure how to do ice skating on the Black Lake in the middle of winter.

Without the skates, it went without saying.

“**The Infinite Soapy Solution**,” the Dark Knight proudly informed them, “**a genial prank brought for you by Artificers Weasley and Weasley**.”

Of all the things that had happened, this one was definitely the least surprising...of course the Twin Terrors of Gryffindor were the ones to invent that. Something that resulted in a prank of that magnitude was *definitely* the kind of thing they would dream to show off in front of tens of thousands of spectators.

The spectators cheered, and if Cedric had to be honest, it hurt his pride. The son of Amos Diggory had not believed the kind of nonsense several Champions had taken to repeat lately, but being humiliated like that...

There were many explosions of darkness reigning in the entire area surrounding the fish market.

“STOP THE DARK KNIGHT! PREVENT THEM FROM FLEEING” Someone roared.

Cedric took a step forwards...and someone slapped him with a big black slimy thing, which would later be revealed to be a fake giant manta ray.

A second fish strike struck him, and Cedric had a very bad idea where this whole battle was going to end.

The Champion of House Hufflepuff tried to run back to the Rialto Bridge, though it wasn’t so much to block the way than to save his dignity.

It took only two steps for Cedric to lose his equilibrium, and less than three seconds later, he was mid-air, about to join the Day Champions swimming in the Grand Canal.

**14 February 1995, Rialto Bridge, San Polo District, Venice**

If Neville met Fred and George today, it was going to be hard to not strangle them.

Creating a few items for the enemy was already bad enough, but this...this disaster had proven the Twins had gone far, far beyond that.

Super-slippery soap. Fireworks of at least seven different sizes, some of them filled with darkness powder, and the Boy-Who-Lived didn’t care if it was from Peru or not.

There had been inflatable fake fishes that every member of the Night Court had used either as a slapping weapon, an object that could make you trip, or a fish jelly bomb that was horrid, both in smell and touch.

Yes, he would have to tell Fred and George to stop. Otherwise, their **Fate** would be the one reserved to the Champions of the Dark.

There were only so many times Neville would refuse to not go for lethal spells when Ron’s brothers worked for the enemy and inflicted them insult to add to the humiliation.

That said...

The battle hadn’t been a complete loss. It was true many of his Court followers had been forced to reveal one more costume to their enemies, only to be projected in the Grand Canal, where good gondoliers were currently busy helping them returning to the market’s pontoon.

It was true the Dark Knight, whoever she was, had escaped again.

But she had left one of her servants behind, and a prisoner was a tremendous victory, especially given how few members the Night Court had to begin with.

“Surrender,” the Champion of Fate called out, as a circle of rapiers encircled the costumed male – with such large shoulders, it had to be a wizard – they had prevented from getting away. “The Dark Knight abandoned you...and you won’t get away this time.”

“*The Dark Knight...has won*.”

Neville frowned. The voice...the voice strongly sounded like the one of Susan Bones. But the Hufflepuff girl, no matter how magically talented she was, had not the height or the body to use the red-black costume that was before them.

“Victory or defeat, it doesn’t matter in your case. Surrender, Night spawn, or suffer the consequences.”

“*The Dark Knight...has won. Glory to the Night Court!”*

Something looking like a jewel fell from the integral mask’s holes where there should be eyes....and suddenly where they had been a prisoner, there was a sizeable fire....which devoured costume and student in an instant.

“What?”

Neville tried to think about a water spell which could be efficient given the circumstances, but...his voice was dry...and in a few seconds, there was nothing left but ashes.

“What by Merlin was that?” Ron asked with fear in his voice. “Surely he...he didn’t blow himself, right?”

“I...I don’t think so?” Angelina replied by his side warily, sheathing her rapier in an elegant move. “This might have been an automaton...the voice...it sounded like its owner amplified and distorted it at the same time.”

“A magical automaton?” Neville shook his head. “That’s not very credible. I can believe Fred and George smuggled all sort of prank items when they entered the city, Judges or no Judges. But even if it was smuggled, an automaton would require a lot of hours to be assembled.”

“I’m only proposing a hypothesis, *my King*.” Angelina said acidly. Neville wondered why she was so confrontational this last week. Didn’t she understand what they were facing? “Feel free to give me a better explanation if there was one.”

“Well, I think-“

“THE CROWD IS TO DISPERSE! THE GLORIOUS, MOST ADULATED DOGE AND HIS CHAMPIONS ARE HONOURING THE RIALTO BRIDGE OF THEIR PRESENCE!”

Neville saw them immediately.

To be far, a blind man would see them.

The neat rows of Guard-Legionnaires marching in tight formation were impossible to miss. Not to mention the way the crowd opened to let them pass was like a river that was carved in two torrents.

“There are...so many...”

Sometimes, Neville wished Ron didn’t speak evident facts like that.

There were only two choices left to them. Fight or retreat.

Chance was with them, most of his Court had been able to get out of the Grand Canal, and they were all on the ‘good side’ of the Rialto, the one where the fish market was taking place. Malatesti and his Court, by contrast, were arriving from the Plaza di San Marco, meaning most of the bridge and the enormous costumes crowd which had laughed when they were humiliated was there.

“RETREAT!” The word tasted absolutely vile, but it also felt *right*. They had rushed here to fight the Dark Knight, and they had failed. At this hour, the Light Champions weren’t prepared to fight the Court of the Doge...while the Dark Champion of War clearly wanted to pick up a fight.

This was not a battle they would win, not over eight members trying to adapt as their wet costumes had become a massive drawback.

“RETREAT!”

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

Most of the morning and the afternoon had been cloudy, a true weather of Venetian winter, but now, as the day ended, the sun was finally gracing them of their presence.

Some Tournament participants would have taken it as a good omen, but Fleur Delacour was not among them.

Not when she was parading in a costume of obsidian and silver, her hair dyed in black colour, and ‘her’ Court was doing its best to ‘rule Venice’.

Because yes, Malatesti had decided to hold the Council of War for the Doge Court in the Ducal Palace itself, under the very eyes of enthusiastic spectators.

“Regrettably, oh great Doge, the Day Champions managed to escape,” one of the Pawns finished his report in a martial tone, “and since we didn’t see them for the rest of the afternoon, I suppose they were busy cleaning themselves...and trying to remove the odour of floppy fishes stuck to their costumes.”

Chuckles and giggles came from everywhere, and Fleur congratulated herself to have refused the conditions imposed by the Day Champions over a month ago.

“Regrettable, indeed,” the Champion of Ares smirked. “And the Dark Knight?”

“Alas, the moment we arrived, my Doge, the Champion of the Dark Court was long gone. And I’m afraid we still don’t have a clue as to the identity of the Champion who was hiding behind this...this impressive costume.”

“There are only two real possibilities,” Romeo Malatesti answered promptly, to her complete surprise, “Lucrezia Sforza and the Queen of the Night Court, Alexandra Potter herself.”

Fleur cleared her throat.

“That’s...an interesting statement to make, oh Doge.”

“It’s not,” the leader of their Court snorted disdainfully, “now that we have been able to assess exactly what happened in the Battle of the Slapping Fishes,” the half-Veela winced listening to the ridiculous name, “it is clear, in my humble opinion, that the Dark Knight used a Venetian duelling style that is heavily favoured by House Sforza. Thus it is Champion of Sforza, or someone who was taught the basics by her.”

This was a good point...though Fleur had never expected Malatesti to make such a logical argument.

But yes, it was the truth. Krum had neither the lethal style nor the body to do the kind of stunts the Dark Knight had pulled off near the Rialto Bridge. Eleonora da Riva was a novice in matters of sword-fighting. The Dark Queen of Durmstrang would have drowned the Grand Canal in blood given the opportunity, and frankly, the Champion of Life was astonished there had been no sign of her committing a massacre today.

“Now, my Court,” the Doge’s expression really, really promised nothing good, “it is time to discuss our plans for tomorrow. I want to light an inferno under the proud backsides of the Night and Day Champions!”

Given by how many potential spies were listening to their every word, Fleur was already convinced the ‘plan’ was going to be a symbol of brutality and overwhelming force...

**14 February 1995, Caffè Florian, San Marco District, Venice**

When the Succubus they were forced to acknowledge as the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina had told them the Caffè Florian was to be the place where they would meet tonight, Albus had been absolutely not surprised.

Neither were Olympe Maxime and Igor Karkaroff, really. After all, who would have expected the wealthy Dark Creature to invite them to one of the most famous and expensive ‘Caffè’ of Venice?

The answer, conservatively, had to be ‘absolutely everyone’.

“While it is too soon to be sure,” Maxime began as they ate their dinner under the light of the enchanted crystals of Murano, “it seems the first night will be calm, according to the Judges’ most recent inspection.”

“I tend to agree with you,” Albus nodded courteously, wondering why the butler nearby did give him such an odd look. Surely his bright purple costume was unique, spectacular, and worthy of notice? “I will also note, with the greatest pleasure, that today has seen no deaths or serious injuries. And the rules have been respected. There have been no breaches to the Statute of Secrecy.”

The latter point, really, had been something he had a lot of scepticism before this Task officially began. When one of the Hogwarts Champions had thought Potion-launching trebuchets were a legitimate tactic to win a Task, Albus had almost dreaded what kind of terrifying magical destruction could be unleashed on thousands of innocent Wizards and Muggles.

But to his relief, nothing destructive had happened. Despite a short full scale battle between Day and Night, the Statute was holding, and the Muggles were perfectly ignorant the contest was magical, as it should be.

“You have a point, Headmaster.” Of course the Succubus couldn’t stay silent... “And I will add, that so far, the public has enjoyed a lot the spectacular rivalry between Night and Day. The entrance of the Dark Knight was discussed by thousands for a couple of hours, but the Battle of the Fish Market is already the stuff of legends.”

“Ah, yes,” Karkaroff grinned, something that always gave the former Chief Warlock the urge to curse him, “it was a brilliant ambush. Decisive, ruthless. I felt the hand of Viktor in this battle.”

The silver-bearded Headmaster calmly observed the High Master of Durmstrang, trying to assess if this latest affirmation was his usual boasting, or something altogether more serious.

To Albus’ consternation, it appeared to be the latter.

“While I agree with you that the Night Court struck in a...decisive manner, and won a symbolic battle against the Day, forcing its opponents to reveal more costumes...” Albus hesitated before deciding to push ahead, “they have not managed to capture or incapacitate a single member of the Day Court.”

If anything the smile of Karkaroff widened...something that was unpleasant.

“Albus! Albus! That’s because you didn’t look for the really important thing!”

“The really important thing?” The Headmaster of Hogwarts repeated cautiously.

“The fishes,” Karkaroff explained like he was speaking to a young child. “Specifically, the swordfish the Dark Knight duelled Champion Falk with. It was missing when the Court of the Doge tried to pursue the Court of the Day. As were four other fishes. I, for one, found it very strange that the Dark Knight bothered stealing the Ducats and paying the fisherman in the first place...and even more that the Night Court’s Champion would tolerate taking such heavy and smelly fishes after withdrawing from the battlefield.”

Igor Karkaroff was right, damn it. How had Albus not seen it for the ploy it was?

It was...frighteningly brilliant.

It made him shiver.

The Night Court had played their opponents for fools. What he had taken for a symbolic victory was absolutely not symbolic, but a one-sided victory.

“You think,” the Defeater of Grindelwald told the former Death Eater, “that the fishes had the Keys of the Fourth Task inside them.”

And the opening ceremony had just revealed how many types of keys that were at stake, in addition to the critical Aquamarine Keys.

“Yes,” Igor said smugly, “yes, I believe it is exactly what happened, Albus.”

“How fascinating,” Angelica Sforza lightly chuckled.

“Your daughter didn’t inform you?” Maxime asked.

“My daughter is a grown witch,” the answer made clear that no, the younger Succubus had not. “And it is far more interesting to not know how things will turn out during this Task.”

“I can’t argue against that,” Albus answered, his mind painfully being reminded that neither Ra nor young Neville had bothered sending back an answer by owl in the last few weeks. As a consequence, the silver-bearded Headmaster was completely in the dark where it came to each Court’s plans and strategic decisions. “But if this first day was more than it appears, I think I can say for all of us that we are curious what the second day will have to offer to us.”

“Indeed,” Igor Karkaroff approved before sipping the warm alcohol he had ordered, “and I will add I am curious as to the Day’s reaction. They have constantly been reacting to the Dark today. Are they able to learn, or will the Night continue to send them in the Grand Canal head first?”

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

There were hours when Henri was able to think clearly.

Contrary to what one thought, this wasn’t exactly a good thing.

Okay, yes, it was a good thing. It proved that he was...sane? The French pureblood couldn’t alas use the word.

No, no he wasn’t sane. Not anymore. But for time to time, usually twice a day, he could think like a rational being. And every time memories of acting like Falk and the others dominated his mind, which always filled him with disgust.

Henri wished he could vomit on Falk and his other accomplices...the Champion of Marduk, for one, was standing next to him...as were many other lackeys of Ra.

It was useless to use these precious seconds of sanity to tell the other Champions they had to stop this madness.

Longbottom was drunk with the power of the Grail, and with him under Ra’s domination, there was no hope whatsoever for a ‘reasonable’ Light to gain the upper hand.

No, all he could do was to observe...and make sure his mouth stayed shut. From all evidence, the fanatics had suffered a one-sided defeat...and they didn’t seem to realise that their entire strategy – or rather, the utter lack of one – was the reason behind the defeat.

As long as they didn’t figure out this ‘minor problem’, well...the Night Court was likely going to make sure they suffered colossal humiliation after colossal humiliation. Phoenix’s feathers, what were they even doing in this very Palace? It was a guarantee that the Doge and the Night Courts knew of the location and had their spies in place to monitor their moves...

“Clearly the Night has no fear to strike on the doorstep of Ca’Luce,” Frode Falk acknowledged after Cedric Diggory criticised something Henri hadn’t heard. “But we have corrected the flaws which allowed our enemies to strike like they did today. Should they try to strike the market a second time, we will slaughter them!”

A few of his sycophants applauded.

Cedric Diggory didn’t. In fact, the Hogwarts Champion was harbouring an expression that one should use for crazy people.

“Why,” the British wizard asked slowly as if he was dreading to learn the answer, “would the Night Court strike again anywhere near the Rialto Bridge? They wanted to test us and pass the message that even close to this palace, there was no place truly safe for us! If they strike again, it will be to burn this palace to the ground, not to make another insignificant gesture and throw us in the Grand Canal!”

“Ridiculous,” Falk watched the Champion he knows dominated in height, though certainly not in wits, with the kind of disrespectful stare one would give ugly insects, “the Palace of Ca’Luce is impregnable. The wards are so powerful one would take an army to breach them, and the enemy doesn’t have an army. They can’t even use their full power in this city without risking a breach of the Statute.”

“Absolutely,” Henri didn’t think Neville Longbottom had realised how stupid he looked right now...a fourteen-year-old-boy trapped into an adult body...and yes, he still behaved like he was fourteen, only he addicted to certain delusional realities. “The inviolability of Ca’Luce is not in question. Don’t trouble yourself with this, Champion Diggory.”

“I totally disagree with everything you say,” Graham Montague intervened. “You say it is not in question, but what sort of assurance do you offer? The Battle of Sloppy Fishes-“

“What,” Neville Longbottom’s became something between a growl and an angry purr, “did you say?”

Henri found himself immediately thinking that they had overestimated a bit the intelligence of the lone Dark Wizard present among the Day Court. There was a lot of idiocy here, but saying that kind of thing around largely reached the ‘suicidal’ threshold...

“The Battle of Sloppy Fishes,” Montague continued, proving that no, he had no instinct of self-preservation, “you know, the massive humiliation the Dark Knight gave you this afternoon when...AARRGH!”

Due to drinking from the Grail, Longbottom could move into some expressive bursts of speed, although not for very long, and it was clearly exhausting for him.

But here, it was Montague...the ‘Day King’ moved and shifted one of his hands into a large paw...

The other Hogwarts Champion tried to evade the blow, but the claws nonetheless touched his face, and since everyone had removed masks and costume tonight, there was nothing to take the blow and protect the right part of the face.

Graham Montague fell with a scream, and his visage was suddenly covered with blood...his blood.

“You will not criticise my orders and battles you refused to take part in, worm of the Dark Lord!” Neville Longbottom spat, and Henri didn’t like at all the righteous anger on his visage. Because, no, what Montague had said was the truth, no matter the insulting manner it had been brought up. “You will obey, or the next time there are Night prisoners, you will join them inside our cells! Do you understand?”

The Champion of Horus watched Montague...and saw real terror in the Champion’s eyes. Yes, the Dark Wizard was not particularly smart...but he finally understood what kind of madness he had so carelessly asked to be part of.

“We are going to activate all tracking rituals, hunting devices, and artefacts the Day Court is allowed to use in this very palace,” the Day King spoke as two Pawns dragged the bleeding Montague out of the hall to provide him healing. “The Night might believe they won something today, but they have failed utterly. We are going to track them across the entire city of Venice, and whatever dark hole they’re choosing to hide, it will provide them no protection when we will hunt them down!”

**14 February 1995, La Fenice Theatre, San Marco District, Venice**

The Theatre of La Fenice, truly, was a marvel of art. Even knowing the emblem was a phoenix, Alexandra couldn’t help but marvel at the incredible decorations which were...everywhere.

And the best part of it was that, just by being polite, they had the theatre all for themselves.

Okay, the Night Court had the theatre for themselves, and for a duration of sixty minutes before it closed its door for the night.

“When they will learn we were here, the Day and Doge Courts will have heart attacks.”

Alexandra smiled at Eleonora’s declaration.

“When? My dear Innocence, I would think the word you may want to use is ‘if’.”

The Light Champion huffed, something that reminded Alexandra of Hermione, though the two witches had very little in common.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, yes I do.” While the Light had begun this Task outrageously confident and sure of its capacity to dominate the battlefield, this arrogance was certainly not going to survive the next forty-eight hours. “Everyone? May I have your attention, please?”

The discussions ceased, and silence returned in the lodge.

“First, congratulations to Champion Krum, whose audacious plan allowed us to defeat the Day Court in their backyard.”

The majority clapped enthusiastically, and Krum made a short reverence, which was...a bit comical, given his costume of Matamore.

“Thanks to this, we have gained five keys.” Lucrezia Sforza presented them on a silver tray, and many murmurs of approval spread. “As you can see for yourselves, one is an Aquamarine Key, and the others are respectively of Ruby, Amethyst, Emerald, and Opal.”

Meaning the Night Court had immediately earned a bonus of Ducats, a bastion-refuge, a secret passage if they could find it, and an armament key, in addition to one of the thirteen Aquamarine Keys that were indispensable for their ultimate victory in the Fourth Task.

“Great news,” Ambre de Courtois cleared her throat and was given the authorisation to speak by a nod, “though I’ve heard they were eight keys, not five, to be collected in the fish market.”

“This is exact,” Alexandra admitted. “But I don’t have any intention to return tomorrow...or to send a Champion or any other member to try to buy the fishes containing them, assuming it is possible to do so. The Day Champions are going to watch the market with hawk’s eyes. If we rush back here, I am confident we will be the ones ambushed.”

“And for the moment, the fools don’t seem to have realised we grabbed the Keys while you slapped them with said fishes,” Lyudmila Romanov snickered. “I support the idea to let them watch the market and waste their time here. The more fools they use to guard the fish market, the fewer braggarts they will have to search for us in the rest of the Venetian maze.”

“Yes,” Viktor Krum approved. “In that regard, the potential loss of three Keys is nothing. It’s unlikely there is another Aquamarine Key here, so the remaining ones are most likely Diamond, Sapphire, and another Opal Key.”

“Even if the Day or the Doge grabbed them, our gains would largely be superior to theirs.” Eleonora remarked. “We have accumulated precious knowledge of the Day’s costumes with this battle, and though we don’t know for sure if they will keep the same formations tomorrow, we have been able to properly analyse how the Day Court reacts when one of us is using excellent theatrical skills.”

Alexandra groaned loudly.

What she had been forced to say had been partially true, but force was to admit that if it hadn’t been part of the challenge to ‘bargain with a fisherman’, the Potter Heiress wouldn’t have done it. Not in front of thousands of spectators...

“Let’s not embarrass our Queen, shall we?” The words would be all the more convincing if Lucrezia didn’t bare her teeth and smile like it was her birthday in advance. “Her performance with words and a swordfish was great, of course. I certainly didn’t intend for my rapier lessons to be used like that.”

“I had to adapt.” And the transfiguration of the fake fish so that the ‘not-swordfish’ had a metal skin that could hold against Falk’s rapier was rather simple, when all things were considered. The hardest part had been to cast the spell without anyone seeing it.

“And you did it brilliantly,” the Succubus assured her. “The performance of the ‘Dark Knight’ today has terrified the Day Court, and its Champions will do their utmost to kill you if they have the chance.”

“You want me to deliver them another humiliation tomorrow?”

“No,” the Champion of Lust answered quickly and honestly. “There’s audacity and then there is stupidity. We took a calculated risk today, and the risk paid off. But we can’t continue to throw you into the fire and expect the opposition to be as incompetent as they were today.”

“Yes,” Krum almost grunted. “For tomorrow, no Dark Knight...or if it necessary, only a minor diversion, and far away from any battle. The importance of the Dark Knight can create a good diversion.”

Alexandra thought over the logic...and didn’t find anything wrong with it.

“All right,” it would certainly be far more resting tomorrow to walk incognito while others did the arduous work this time. “You seem to have thought of it at length while I washed off myself of the fake fishes’ smell. Who will take centre stage tomorrow, and do you have any clue where the next Aquamarine Key is?”

“To answer your second question first,” the Bulgarian Seeker replied, “there have been significant announcements and advertisement that tomorrow, there will be a competition of sea jousting. In my opinion, there’s a high likelihood the winning team will win an Aquamarine Key.”

“Err...I see.” And now the Champion of Death was very glad to not have volunteered for that, because she had the feeling that if you weren’t good at this jousting, you were often going to ‘visit’ the waters of the Venetian lagoon...and those were not exactly warm in the middle of February.

“And as for your first question,” Lucrezia Sforza purred, “who else but our dear Champion of Durmstrang can triumph against all odds?”

Judging by Lyudmila Romanov’s significant grimace, the Succubus wasn’t speaking of Krum for the next major challenge...

“That’s...are you sure?” The Fenrir Animagus was certainly resourceful, but the last time Lyudmila Romanov had been submerged into a large quantity of water was the First Task...

“We have planned several diversions with the help of the Artificers,” Ambre de Courtois assured her.

“And those diversions involve?”

“Fire,” the Dark Champion of Chaos’ teeth were suddenly very, very sharp. “A lot of fire.”

**Author’s note**: The first day of the Carnival Civil War is now over.

Next chapter will deal with the second day of the Fourth Task.

The Courts are now ready for war, and have filled their arsenals. Venice and the world are not going to be the same...ever.

The provisional title for chapter 102 is: *Fires of Judgement*.

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