**Chapter 85**

**The Tournament Begins**

**31 October 1994, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

After a night where she had almost no sleep, Alexandra wouldn’t have woken up at dawn.

But today was Samhain, and so despite having at best two hours of sleep, the Hydra Animagus stretched out of her white bed, fully rested.

This was abnormal, even for a Champion of the Morrigan. Her patron Goddess had led her through Pandemonium to many nasty places last night – though not to the headquarters of the Death Eaters, unfortunately – and the amount of fighting and killing she did should have left her somewhat tired.

Some part of her wanted to blame the Exchequer, but the Dark Wizards couldn’t be entirely responsible for this. For Death to rise in power so abruptly meant the Light had screwed things up. Again.

A few seconds later, the Potter Heiress decided it wasn’t her problem. Everything which increased the power of Death proportionally empowered her too, and the boons of a Power increased her likelihood to survive the Tournament with no missing parts. Still...the sensation was unfamiliar. The young witch hoped it wasn’t going to fracture her renewed control over her magic. Overpowering your incantations several dozen times was not funny when it was the norm and you didn’t intend for it to happen.

Alexandra didn’t bother putting clothes on after removing her nightclothes...she just sprinted across the Roman-themed villa the Venetians had ‘loaned’ to her for the duration of the Tournament – more accurately, as long she stayed a Champion – and dived into the luxurious pool which, in her opinion, was one of the best features of this private palace in all but name. And thanks to the privacy wards, despite the proximity of other Champion’s residences, she could stay here all day and no one would be the wiser.

“Well, maybe not everyone...”

Atalanta, queen of the snowy owls, just landed on one of the deckchairs next to the pool, several letters between her talons. And when her green-eyed mistress feigned to close her eyes as she enjoyed the water, a loud series of hoots was made to remind her of her duties.

“I’m coming, I’m coming...”

With everything taking up her attention yesterday, Alexandra had not found the time to install Atalanta’s perch or anything else, but a quick search found a series of silvery owl-landing perches in one of the numerous storage cabinets. Between this and several owl treats, her owl was soon preening in delight and finally allowed her to receive her mail.

The time to find some clothes for the day – it was going to take forever to place everything in the wardrobes, she just knew it – Alexandra returned back next to the swimming pool and read the content of the letters, Atalanta taking position behind her. Most of it was stuff which could wait, except Gringotts – money, money – and the letter from her guardian informing her she would arrive in a few hours with her dress for the Opening Ceremony.

Since most of it didn’t really deserve an answer, there was just one thing to do.

“Come here, girl.”

Namely petting her snowy owl, who after working so hard for the last few days, really deserved some cuddling and even a few Charms on her beautiful white feathers.

Atalanta hooted several times in pleasure.

The owl and witch stayed with each other for a long, long time in this position, one irregularly eating bird food, and she drinking cold water while admiring the view.

And what a view it was.

The architects hired by the Scuola Regina had made sure that from her villa, she could watch the entire valley, which included the gigantic Coliseum in the middle of it, but also the rivers pouring into its heart, several substitute Champion’s villas just below her – the details save the walls and the basics were warded same as hers, though – and a fantastic amount of vegetation and enclosures for local animals that she hadn’t given proper attention yesterday. Between the greenhouses and that, the valley was truly something special.

Alexandra couldn’t begin to imagine how much it had cost. In fact, if the Potter Heiress hadn’t the ICW information to rely upon, she wouldn’t have thought it possible that the ‘Regina Coliseum’ was built in less than ten years.

The size alone was stupendous enough; as the sun lit the entire valley, it seemed more enormous, not less. But the more Alexandra ‘tasted’ the magic, the more it felt like specific fortification and immense earth-based spells had been used to rise and mould this towering edifice.

The Exchequer may not have needed to build upon old ruins or seize an old seat of power, really. In less than two years, they had done the next best thing to building an entirely brand-new one.

As a witch aware of how much lore of the old legends had been lost, Alexandra didn’t know if she should be admiring or worried...maybe a bit of both was the prudent reaction.

“Okay girl, petting time is over. Let’s see what the nice Venetians built in our villa.”

The answer to that informal question was...a lot.

Alexandra had already seen all there was to see about her new bedroom, and the worst that could be said about it was that while it was smaller than the room she used at Zabini Manor, it was because Lady Stella had such high standards for clothes-stocking and other things that the Scuola Regina couldn’t follow. The walls were mostly white, very peaceful, with a few painted sections representing Venice.

The swimming pool – fifteen metres long – was palatial. Yet this was just the beginning. In addition to it, Alexandra had been granted a very large bathroom, with marble bath, shower, toilets, sink, and all...and it all could be used to establish a miniature salon of beauty should one so chose. The mosaics were brand-new and yet managed to give a priceless vibe.

The dining room, yes, because according to the notices on the table, you could order meals here from the Scuola Regina’s kitchens, and House Elves would bring them in, no questions asked...so yes, there was a dining room, with a large rectangular table, with half a dozen wooden chairs impressively carved, carpets so soft walking upon them bare-footed was an experience like no other, and the furniture around was...astounding.

What attracted Atalanta’s attention the most was a painting of snowy owls flying in a ‘V’ formation...and when Alexandra brought her closer to satisfy the avian curiosity, the Basilisk-Slayer immediately noticed a small ‘L. M. Evans’ signed on the lower right.

So her mother had painted it. It was...well, Alexandra wasn’t exactly able to tell which artwork had been created by a master of the art, but it looked very good.

The dining room – which could and would serve as a conference and study room – was the largest room of the villa, followed by the bedroom and the bathroom, and of course the pool. But it wasn’t by far the only room. In fact, there were so many separate sections that Alexandra was one hundred percent sure high-level Space-Extension Enchanting had been used to make it a permanent affair.

There was a small Brewing Room, filled with the most common ingredients and five cauldrons of different sizes. There was a Ritual Room – Dumbledore was going to lose his marbles the moment a Hogwarts Champion informed him of that. This one was rather plain, of course: even if their hosts were rich, Rituals were very private affairs. There was, of course, a Library, with copies of school books required for all Venetian students at the Scuola Regina. There was a miniature Duelling Room...it wasn’t exact, there wasn’t a Duelling Platform, but there was a dummy to test your offensive spells, and it was warded triple-time to allow her to perform magic without risk of destroying the walls or anything important. Maybe it was best to call it the ‘Magic-testing room’.

Opening one of the last doors revealed a small but splendid owlery – there was a reason the perches’ cabinet had been so close to it – where between fifteen and seventeen birds could easily rest and sleep without problem. And returning on her way to the bedroom, Alexandra realised she didn’t really need to use the massive dining room to study...because she had a private office, with casings and protected glasses indicating it could also serve as a trophy room, vault room, and mini-armoury.

“Damn, girl,” the Ravenclaw Champion caressed the head of her white partner, who at the moment was incredibly satisfied by her surroundings. “We are going to live in great luxury for several months. I wonder how different the villas of the potential replacement Champions are?”

The small bronze bell ringing to announce the arrival of her magical guardian placed this question as a secondary priority for now.

“Please return to the Owlery, girl. I must see what sort of princess’ gown Lady Zabini has found while I wasn’t looking...”

**31 October 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

The Tournament hadn’t even begun, and Neville felt like he was an impostor trying to infiltrate an event he hadn’t any right be to be invited to.

This wasn’t because his grandmother had insisted on giving him new robes which were identical copies of the ones his father had donned at his age. It wasn’t because of the gold and silver, the statues and the paintings hurting his eyes. Longbottom Manor was not able to stand the comparison, but his House’s chief manor was a prestigious and well-decorated fortress-turned-residence.

No, the real reason he felt so out of place was the disdain and indifference the future lord Longbottom saw on the majority of the Champions’ faces. These were only expressions, but so far, they had largely been backed by the few conversations he was able to have with foreign wizards and witches. Dark or Light, few Champions and non-Champions cared he was the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’, or what the title implied to begin with. The two Venetians he had talked to were convinced Voldemort was unworthy of the title of ‘Dark Lord’ in the first place, and that his parents had wounded the monster – his survival had been vindicated by the events of the Quidditch World Cup which made clear ‘Tom Riddle’ wasn’t dead.

In a single day, the potential Champion of House Gryffindor had gained the experience of something he had often dreamed of when the crowds in Britain almost tore his clothes in their eagerness to touch him: he was utterly ignored.

What would have been impossible should the Tournament have been held at Hogwarts was here a reality from the first hour. Neville was almost treated like every ‘aspiring-Champion’...though it wasn’t exactly the whole truth. If he had to be honest, he was treated a bit worse...because he was a Champion of Magic, and evidently he had failed to secure one of the first seats to be proclaimed a Champion.

Thank Fate and whatever Powers were on his side that he wasn’t the only one in that case, otherwise the respect he had for his own accomplishments would have demoralised him further.

“Nervous, Longbottom?” a voice asked him in French.

The back-haired Gryffindor turned and nodded.

“A bit, de Condé,” the future Lord answered in the same language. Had he mentioned how irritating that save between British wizards and witches, everyone here feigned to not understand English? “It is one thing to know we’re going to participate in an inter-school Tournament, another to really be there in person.”

“Assuredly,” the French Champion of Horus nodded before giving him a gentle smile. “Small piece of advice: if I were you, I would stop staring in direction of Sforza’s breasts. You aren’t the only one doing it, and she loves the attention, but it’s better not to continue.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Neville lied, knowing his blushing face would likely condemn him in a heartbeat. At least he had a strong excuse not to look in her direction anymore.

“It’s not your fault,” thank everything he owned, the older male Champion didn’t look like he wanted to make fun of him. “Your Occlumency studies aren’t at a sufficient level to allow you protection from her lust aura, and her body is a weapon magically designed to be the most seductive predator of the magical world. Unless you don’t like women, the methods to protect oneself from Succubae are long and difficult to master.”

“Yes...” This wasn’t exactly reassuring at all. “At least she hasn’t an Animagus form on top of everything else...”

The daughter of the Scuola Regina’s Headmistress was a Succubus, and all Succubae of sufficient power had all the advantages of the ‘normal’ Metamorphmagus and none of the drawbacks. Plus there were the talents and the powers the powerful Succubae could master. Plus she was a Champion of Desire, which meant she could send ‘love blasts’ at everyone, and tranquilly cast spells at them while everyone stood in awe of her beauty. Yes, unfair didn’t fully describe fully the situation.

Thankfully now that he looked from a lot more steps away, Neville could look at her aura without feeling...different...and the purple-pink *thing* swirling around the Succubus was more nauseating than attractive. Lucrezia Sforza also looked more feral and dangerous, part of her real appearance flashing through his senses.

“So the Army of Light believes,” was the less-than-reassuring comment of Henri de Condé.

“Err...the briefings we were given on her said it was certain.”

“And I’m sure no briefing you were ever given was wrong?”

Looking at it that way, he had a point. Of course, there were good reasons to believe the Army of Light’s spies were in the right.

“Fleur herself admitted she has no Animagus form, and her Veela lineage is extremely similar to the Sforza Succubae.”

“I don’t think so,” the Champion of Horus said in a low whisper, but managing to maintain a dignified appearance. Neville hated to admit it, but of all the Champions of their side, de Condé was likely the one who looked the most like he was cut for the role. He managed to be even more good-looking and noble than Cedric Diggory without effort. “Fleur is a first-generation Veela-human hybrid. We don’t know for sure if Lucrezia is a hybrid or a full-blooded Succubus. If she is a hybrid, she’s certainly not a first-generation creation. That means the usual rules may not apply to her.”

“Okay, but she never transformed into anything else than a Succubus, as far as we know.”

“True...” Henri conceded. “But it leaves another issue. And this is the fact that whether she has an Animagus form or not, she may very well have the skills and the power to kill us in a duel with her wand skills alone. I have the advantage in offensive martial magic given the Power I’m sworn to, but she didn’t win her school’s preliminary just by being pretty.”

Yes...more problems. It wasn’t enough that the Succubus could likely win a beauty contest with Delacour – who wasn’t exactly ugly herself – the extremely expensive red robe with rubies she wore reminded everyone she was the Heiress of one of the wealthiest Houses of Europe, and this didn’t count her membership in an evil organisation.

“Since...err...” it was not really eloquent of him, he was sure, “we admitted Sforza is redoubtable, who do you think is going to be the least dangerous Dark Champion in this Tournament?”

“Oh that’s easy,” the dark blonde-haired boy said courteously. “Poliakov, the Champion of Confusion.”

No fingers were pointed, it would have been extremely rude, and it wasn’t exactly difficult to find the dark-haired boy in the small groups of Champions and aspiring-Champions in the waiting hall.

“There is a sort of...sickness in his aura.” Neville said slowly. Outwardly, there was little to make Yegor Poliakov someone remarkable. The dark robes supplemented with black fur were also the official clothes chosen by four other students of Durmstrang. But magically...he was indeed the weakest of the Champions of the Dark, and maybe the weakest Champion of the Powers, period. His aura was also sickening to look at, a distorted yellow-red angry *thing*. “Did anyone see him fight seriously before the preliminaries?”

“No, and it is a bit-“

What de Condé had been about to say died in his throat, as a new female Champion made her entry. Neville shivered before he even caught sight of her, for the sheer power coming ahead was simply terrifying. One second later, he realised this was Alexandra Potter.

Except of course she hardly looked like the Ravenclaw witch the Hogwarts students saw every day. The dark robes and clothes had been replaced, not by Ravenclaw-themed colours, but by a long and elaborate gown of light green and dark blue which managed to unite in perfect harmony. A diadem of sapphires and emeralds was circling her head, and a magical brooch of diamonds pinned the rest of her hair above her neck. It was very much the opposite style of Lucrezia Sforza, showing little skin, with the robe going higher than her necklace, and her arms begin covered by long silk gloves of ocean and grass colour.

Neville blushed again, though the attractiveness died quickly as he saw her aura in its full majesty. There was emerald magical lightning sparkling everywhere, and behind her, a mysterious veil shivered, partially opened on the world of wizards and witches.

Potter looked like a Queen today. And in a way, she was. She was the Queen of Death.

“Do you think you can arrange an opportunity for me to speak with her? In private if possible, and before the Tournament’s First Task.”

“You don’t ask for much...” Neville didn’t groan, but he wasn’t far from it. “Why do you want me as intermediary, by the way? Every Champion has his or her own villa now, and yours is closer to hers than mine. In fact, why do you want to speak with her at all?”

“The villas are monitored by the Exchequer, and I haven’t the skill to disable their spy-wards.” Henri said like it was evident. “As for why I want to speak with her, I think it’s evident. She is only one out of two Dark Champions we are reasonably sure to not be an Exchequer’s servant or ally. And I don’t even want to consider entering negotiations with Chaos.”

The Powers had to love irony, for the moment these words were uttered, a new monstrous appearance was felt, and it was even bigger than Potter’s power.

“You are going to fight *that*?”

“No,” the Champion of Horus corrected seriously, “we are going to try *surviving that*.”

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Every conversation stopped when Lyudmila Romanov entered the hall serving as waiting room for the Champions.

Some of it, Alexandra was rather sure, was the mild shock of seeing the Dark Queen live up to her name: from high heels to necklace, the silk, fur, and other materials composing her dress robes were black, without exception. Depending on the illusions cast and the light of the sun, it was easy to believe she was soaked in a cloud of darkness.

But it was more likely that this source of fear came from the fact the winner of the Durmstrang preliminaries had chosen to flare up her power. Something no Champion, Light or Dark, had dared to do until now. The Succubus had thrown precise spears of lust and desires to test their self-control, but those had been tricks and half-tests to see if one opponent could be provoked into doing something very unwise.

Here there was no playing around. The Power of Chaos was not assaulting them per se, but it was the equivalent magically of grabbing someone’s hair to plunge his or her head into a cauldron full of water. ‘Friendly’ was not and would never be appropriate to describe the deed.

The sensation was really unpleasant, to not use the word ‘horrible’. It was like the air and the very heart of the world was suddenly impure. The Hydra in her wanted to plunge into the nearest source of water to cleanse her scales.

Chaos felt like something incredibly impure. A small amount of it might be tolerable, but here acting like a beacon of darkness, it wasn’t.

After a few seconds, realising the Tsar’s daughter didn’t intend to put her aura under wraps again, conversations resumed and Champions feigned to not focus on the Russian witch anymore.

But the nervousness, the poorly-hidden fear, and the loathing gave away the fact no one really stopped thinking about the Dark Queen. It was likely wise, because she wasn’t going to disappear any time soon.

“She challenges us,” a voice in Italian preceded the presence of a tall teenager. And when she means tall, Alexandra knew the near-adult would have had his chances playing basketball in the non-magical world. Between Nutrient Potions and other magical help, the Ravenclaw Champion had grown by leaps and bounds, going so far as to catch some boys and so far reaching a respectable 1.66m, if one used the logical European system of measurement.

The Champion who now faced her was far, far taller than that. And he was more muscled too.

All in him seemed to incite strength and violence, from his milk chocolate skin to his too-sharp nose.

“Oh I don’t know, War,” The Champion of Death said lightly. “It could be an attempt to remind us of our places before the Ceremony begins.”

Whether it was the former or the latter, Alexandra wasn’t about to let the Champion of Loki get what she wanted. The Dark Queen was incredibly powerful, more than her despite the fact that on Samhain, Death was supposed to be over the five other Dark Powers. But as Flitwick had reminded her in their duels, power wasn’t everything, and there was more to this Tournament than raw power, otherwise the judges would just measure everyone’s magical cores and the results would be published one day later before all the Champions returned home.

“She needs to be broken publicly,” Romeo Malatesti, Champion of Ares, said in a voice which was as pleasant to listen to as it was filled with danger. “Whatever her plans, they mustn’t be allowed to succeed.”

“Even if they include hostilities on a grand scale?”

The Champion of the Dark Power of War gave her a ferocious smile.

“You and I both know that she cares only about Chaos and Herself. Whatever war would be fought would know no discipline, no honour, no sides...and no rules.”

“I know, yes.” Nobody had dared say it aloud since their arrival at the Scuola Regina, but it was obvious Lyudmila Romanov was a Dark Lady in-being, where the job of evil conqueror was concerned. Unless they had all completely misjudged her intentions, this Tournament was certainly the last time anyone would have the opportunity to stop Loki’s Champion before she plunged Europe into fire and violence on a grand scale.

“In that case, let us fight her together.”

Alexandra looked at the near-adult Venetian with suspicion, and not because he was far taller than her. For a second, there had been a spike in his core, as if Romeo had tried to...shift his war-like aura into a more Death-like aspect.

Effectively, suddenly the part of Hydra in her had found his voice more bearable...but if anything, it made Alexandra more suspicious. Because no one, not even a student of the host school, could know if they were going to be together during the First Task, or rig the judges’ schedule of ‘festivities’ if they weren’t.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the green-eyed Animagus told the Champion of Ares. “I certainly don’t trust you enough to have my back when I fight her. For that matter, I am even less certain you will be anything more than a burden in an alliance against Chaos.”

“I am the Champion of War.”

The magical charisma which warmed her skin was brutal, and somehow, managed to make her heart beat faster. Alexandra grimaced internally as she was well aware behind her light blue-and-green robe, her body was reacting to this wordless offer.

“And I have sent a significant number of persons who annoyed me beyond the veil. Remember that, bloody blade.”

The smirk of the Venetian grew wider, and he saluted her widely before departing. For obvious reasons, Alexandra was really unconvinced she had come out on top of this conversation, no pun intended.

Fortunately, to lighten the mood, she could count on Susan, who had decided to abandon the other Hufflepuffs for a few minutes. Her girlfriend looked absolutely fantastic in her gold-and-red robe, her red hair turning into a cascade of fire between cosmetics and a weak glamour.

“Ah, here is my muse of beauty and arts,” the Potter Heiress took two steps forwards, very slowly, wondering for the tenth time how her guardian had managed to convince her heels and dressing like that were a good idea.

“Divine flatterer,” the Badger replied with a curtsy, extravagant, and no doubt played for the laugh of it. “You know everyone is looking at you, right?”

“I would prefer some abstain,” the Ravenclaw admitted. Some Durmstrang Champions – not Romanov or Krum – had expressions which made her quite uncomfortable. “And speaking of-“

The music of a violin and several magnificent singers’ voices began to be heard, and the ornamental doors at the end of the hall were opened by masked wizards in Renaissance guards’ uniforms.

“I think our discussion will have to continue later.”

“Yes, it will.” Alexandra sighed. It was time, like the proverb said, to face the music...and whatever problems the Tournament had in store for them.

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Fleur Delacour was the first to enter the hall where the Opening Ceremony was held. It had been quite amusing seeing Romanov and she, alongside a few other Champions, verbally duel each other for this ‘privilege’. Alexandra hadn’t bothered. What was the deal anyway? Sure, the photographers and journalists were going to take pictures showing you leading the Champions’ procession, but it wasn’t going to give anyone a noticeable advantage. The fanatic of the Army of Light was ridiculous once more, except this time, it seemed her stupidity had contaminated other boys and girls.

Once formally announced by the herald and authorised to advance into the hall, however, these thoughts were quickly discarded. Much like everything else, the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina had not thought small for the Opening Ceremony.

The Champion of the Morrigan had expected a space-extended hall. One couldn’t physically put thousands of spectators inside one without that. But Alexandra gaped at the sight of a gigantic fireball clashing with a manifestation of gigantic ice stalagmites, of earth ramparts vanishing under the blows of tornadoes and storms, of lightning striking a tumultuous sea, of...

It took her a second or two to realise that the phenomenon was limited to eyesight, and thanks to being a Hydra, it was easy to shrug off the effects.

It remained extremely impressive, though. The Venetian Enchanters had woven a massive illusion in the hall, allowing all spectators, Champions and non-Champions, to marvel at a battle of the elements between the round tables where the judges were seated, and the stands where the rest of the spectators waited on each side.

They weren’t led in a straight line, of course. It would have been too simple and too short: instead each Champion was guided before hundreds of important people. Alexandra doubted she would remember a tenth of their names by the end of tonight, but this was the gesture which counted. Adults, students – Nigel and Luna had been invited as journalists, and there were far from the only ones to have sneaked in via one favour or another, House Malfoy, McLaggen, and a considerable number of British Houses were present too.

Unfortunately, that meant there weren’t spared politician’s speeches. Fortunately, Fudge wasn’t among their number. The only two the Potter Heiress recognised – not counting Dumbledore – were Crouch and Bagman for England.

Finally, a courteous assistant suggested they place themselves at the unoccupied centre of the room, facing the ten judges, who had all stood up to form a line of their own. On the Champion’s side, the order from left to right was Durmstrang, Scuola Regina, Hogwarts, and Beauxbatons. Each titular Champion was in the first line, with their replacements coming right behind them. They did not wait long to see what was in store for them, though the miniature volcano forged into the illusion was a nice touch.

The lights dimmed, and enormous blue flames were summoned without an incantation. And the flames, given the impressive warmth they released, were not part of any illusion.

Out of the ten wizards and witches, it was an African-looking man who stepped down to close the distance. His visage was scarred, and given how he walked, there were certainly more hidden beneath his sandy-coloured robes. Yet he didn’t look weak or diminished.

“Champions, welcome to the European Magical Tournament. My name is Mohammed ben Qassim, licensed Beastmaster of the Moroccan Sultanate. With the support of my peers, I have been nominated to referee both this ceremony and the First Task.”

Well, that certainly explained the scars...and if there was any doubt there were XXXXX-class beasties ahead, the possibility had just died.

The fires shifted to illuminate Judge ben Qassim and leave the nine others in the shadows.

“I know you have been warned repeatedly by your preliminaries’ judges. I know other authorities and your Professors have repeated over and over how much a competition of this nature can be for any wizard and witch. Which is why I give you one last chance to step back. No shame will darken your name. No one will think ill of you to give your seat to another.”

All Champions remained silent. For a multitude of reasons, they had all made their choices, signed quantities of parchments, and fought their way through the preliminaries. Those who could have withdrawn were eliminated a long time ago.

“Then let the European Magical Tournament officially begin!”

The illusion went ever-increasingly complex as a tempest of the five elements surrounded them. There were numerous acclamations from the crowd, but they paled to the roar of magic which was infused into the room.

As the storm vanished, masked figures rushed before them. There were sixteen, one for each Champion, and upon the golden trays they presented with aristocratic reverence, a jewel-decorated object waited.

These sixteen items were all different. The one Alexandra was presented was a small cup in gold upon which a big emerald had been embedded right above the foot. Diggory next to her had a sort of divination orb’s replica...but with some diamonds. The moment her finger touched the metal, though, the Basilisk-Slayer knew this was no common piece of jewellery or luxurious bauble. This thing had been enchanted to be part of a complex ritual.

So this was the trap. And it arrived at a moment no one had the possibility of fleeing anymore.

“You have been given your clue. On the fifth of November, which is precisely in five days, each Champion’s goal will be to recover it in the arena of the New Coliseum that the Scuola Regina so generously placed at our disposal. And...ah, yes. You will need to pour some of your magic into it for the spells to activate.”

Either the man was a very good actor, or he really wasn’t involved in the plans of the Exchequer.

Anyway, it didn’t change anything. Alexandra delicately removed the long glove covering her left hand and most of her forearm, and wordlessly added her magic into the small golden cup. Hieroglyphs burned in emerald fire, and a cold green fire added its presence for five seconds.

“Good, good,” the Moroccan judge approved when they had all done so – Warrington was the last, and had to use his wand, which was just...okay, she wasn’t going to comment upon it. “I am sure you are quite curious about these objects.”

Curious, yes...let’s go with curious. Yes, Alexandra was sarcastic.

“These specially-crafted artefacts will be of vital importance in your quest to win the Tournament. As you have not the time to examine all the runes and enchantments, I will give you a brief description. Should you manage to recover your Tournament Clue before the end of the imparted time of each Task, after we Judges give you your score, this artefact will activate and release into your custody a clue for the next Task of the European Magical Tournament. I trust you understand the implications.”

Oh yes, Alexandra did.

This made failure in one Task a double penalty: if you failed to recover the ‘Tournament Clue’, not only would the Champion lose a massive quantity of points, he or she would be denied the big clue for the next contest. Since information was worth its weight in gold, this was a neat drawback before one step was made into the Coliseum.

“Yes, Champion Delacour?”

“We have these artefacts in our hand. Are we going to receive a clue for the First Task?”

Mohammed ben Qassim chuckled at the question of the blonde.

“No, I’m afraid not. The First task is the only one where no clues are delivered to you. We want to test your courage, your determination, and your ability to adapt in dangerous conditions. Any other questions?”

Surprisingly, it was Malatesti who raised his hand next.

“We will receive a clue for the next Task each time we complete one in the imparted time. Are there any possibilities to earn more clues?”

“An excellent question!” The Beastmaster complimented the Champion of Ares. “Yes, there will be ways to find more clues in order for you to prepare better for your next challenges...but this won’t be the case for the Second Task. The clue you will be given at the end of the First Task – assuming you complete it of course - is all we are ready to grant you.”

There were more questions, but they didn’t reveal useful knowledge. Alexandra already knew there was a Wand Ceremony on the third of November – though Weapon Ceremony would have been more accurate. Many rules which were mentioned – like how it was forbidden to fight another Champion between two Tasks – had been mentioned countless times before their arrival at the Scuola Regina.

And the Judge, obviously prepared for this avalanche of questions, refused to divulge the critical details everyone would have loved to know for the First Task.

They knew they had to recover their Tournament Clue – in her case, her very own ‘Tournament Cup’, but little more than that. The survivor of Brise-Roc had supposed they would compete in groups of four Champions; right now, she didn’t know if her hypothesis was correct or not.

“I have a feeling it’s going to be interesting,” Cedric whispered, “for the audience, at least.”

“Yes,” Alexandra nodded as she handed back the golden cup to the masked individual who had brought it, trying not to flinch as she saw powerful magic currents fluctuate in the hall. “Now it’s again waiting until the fifth.”

“Warrington looks ill.”

“Well, obviously,” the Champion of Death raised an eyebrow while murmuring. “He’s finally realising he has less than one week to learn everything he didn’t bother to listen to over the last several years.”

“Cold.” The older Hufflepuff said.

“At the risk of being colder, Diggory,” the green-eyed Potter Heiress said quietly. “Focus on your own survival. I don’t think they invited a notorious Beastmaster to be among the Judges because he had a pleasant personality.”

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“So this is their trap...the Music of the Thirteen Seals.”

As there was a lot of classical music, countless cheers made by students, and sonorous illusions to make plenty of noise, Albus thought the low tone of Archmage Ra was not necessary. Even the known agents of the Exchequer in the crowd were clearly busy congratulating themselves, not listening to the conversations of the Light. Whatever their goal was, evidently, they had achieved it...and no wizard or witch out of the Army of Light, Trinity, or the Order of the Phoenix could change it.

“I suppose it is a complex ritual,” the Headmaster of Hogwarts said thoughtfully. Rituals weren’t his specialty, but for all his reading, the Defeater of Grindelwald had never heard of it before today.

“Obscure, yes,” the Phoenix Animagus answered. “Complex? No, not really. Perhaps it was harder than it should be given the scale our enemies are working upon. But it is not really difficult to cast, no. The material cost was more of an obstacle for them, I think.”

“Then...” Albus Dumbledore caressed his silvery beard. “What exactly this ritual is supposed to do?”

“I have not the faintest idea,” the Lord of the Trinity admitted after a few seconds where he presented a stone-like expression.

Dumbledore did his best not to look too worried.

“But you recognised the ritual.”

“Yes. But the Music of the Thirteen Seals can be compared to...the magical foundations of one of our temple-pyramids. It does not rely on the caster being a Light or Dark wizard. It relies on...”

The Archmage frowned and did not finish his sentence. In Albus’ opinion, he had lost himself in thoughts older than several empires.

“The principle of the ritual would nonetheless be a great help.” The old British wizard told his ally. “Because unless I have difficulties counting, the Champions were only handed sixteen artefacts, and not all of the Powers’ Champions were involved in this...ritual activation.”

Albus had watched as the magic rippled when every Champion poured his or her magic into the artefact, binding Champion and the four potential replacements. That said, Urmah Temen, Champion of Marduk, was not part of this unprecedented binding. The same applied for another Champion of the Dark too.

“There was another artefact,” Ra replied in a distracted tone, “they hid it very well, but I felt it for a second...this was this one they used to bind seven students, including the two other Champions. As a result, this gives them a very stable Arithmantic matrix. Seventeen ‘Tournament Clues’ to serve as the keys of their ritual. Seven observer-participants to represent the balance between the Light and the Dark, with one Champion of each side bound. Sixteen plus seven makes twenty-three, again a prime number, which means stability.”

“That still doesn’t tell me what the ritual is supposed to do.”

“Empower thirteen ‘Seals’ they must have spent decades preparing for, of course.”

“By ‘Seals’, we’re speaking about-“

“Monuments which are each the shape and the size of a major pyramid, carved in Old Runes, and sanctified by dozens of purifying rituals.”

Albus did not take long to arrive at a conclusion.

“I suppose the Coliseum they showed us is one.”

“No,” Ra countered as a new illusion changed the floor under their feet into a resplendent ice surface. “If it was, I would have felt it...or recognised it. The Coliseum is the lynchpin, the Heart of the Music of the Thirteen Seals. It is the only location where the keys can be activated properly. It is possible there will be a small pyramid below the arena to spread the power of the thirteen Seals, but it is unimportant. It isn’t a Seal, and we can’t destroy it without causing a catastrophe.”

“Not that it really was a solution in the first place.” Albus Dumbledore grimaced internally at the idea of members of the Order of Phoenix invading an international Tournament. The ICW would crucify Britain economically and diplomatically, and as one of the order-givers, he would become a hunted man. “We need to destroy the Seals, I take it. It isn’t going to be easy, but since it is a major ritual, they can’t hide them under a Fidelius.”

“They can’t,” confirmed the Archmage as illusionary fireworks brought more acclamations from the new generation of wizards and witches. “But the Seals can be anywhere in the world if my treacherous brother has made his calculations correctly. And though a Fidelius can’t work, they can be warded against the elements and significant damage. I wouldn’t be surprised if a few were at the bottom of lakes, hidden somewhere on Antarctica, or near-invisible in a volcano.”

This was...bad. No, this was an understatement. It was absolutely dreadful...and he couldn’t even begin to search for them himself, since the Tournament’s obligations forced him to stay here until the end of the Tournament, with only a few days where he could excuse himself.

The jaws of the lethal trap had closed, and Albus had the bad feeling it was merely the first strike.

“Moreover, we have to find each specific Seal before one of the keys activate it. Once the Seal and whatever magical process it is supposed to do has been unleashed upon this world, knowing where it is will be absolutely useless. And since the First Task is in less than one week...”

If anything, this made him all the more...troubled. Troubled and worried.

“I don’t understand. You are saying every Tournament Champion will be able to do...whatever is necessary to use his artefact-key in order to activate the Seals? In that case, the Exchequer’s Champions must already know what they need to do and-“

“No,” Ra interrupted him. “They can’t. Not unless they were able to change the very basics the Music of the Thirteen Keys, at least. If they want to preserve the balance of the ritual, Osiris and his ritual-makers can’t tell *anything* to their servants who participate. The rule applies for those who don’t serve them too.”

“It is...sheer folly,” the Headmaster of Hogwarts felt the words escape his lips. If the Seals were the size Ra implied – and his ally had little reason to lie – the effects were likely going to be earth-shaking worldwide...and they were activated by processes none of the participants had any idea to guard themselves against?

Maybe even ‘folly’ was too limited to properly describe the problem...

“It is,” the Archmage approved. “However, it is the game he has decided to play. Given the nature of the ritual and the magical power thresholds, it is guaranteed the most important ritual for Osiris and the Exchequer needs to be activated last, in the Final Trial, before the Summer Solstice comes and purifies his odious machinations. In a way he delivered a very blunt challenge. If we keep a majority of the Seals intact, we win. If all thirteen Seals are activated, we lose...and I certainly don’t want to see what he needs thirteen massive rituals for.”

“I share your opinion,” Dumbledore approved. “What I don’t like is that with several of their members among the host school, the architects of the Coliseum, and likely the Judges of the European Magical Tournament, they had months to make plans which will ensure the Champions will be guided in activating the Seals. And we have to monitor every Champion, since being loyal to our cause won’t prevent the activation, even if it is done by a Light Champion.”

“Yes...Osiris really outdid himself to give us headaches this time. But we will win-“

Without warning, the Dark swallowed him. It was like Albus was stabbed repeatedly by torture instruments, such was the pressure of the horrible power striking them.

It lasted no more than a few seconds probably, but for him, it felt like years. Around them, the Opening Ceremony’s festivities were continuing as if nothing had happened.

And in a certain way, it was true...from their perspective.

But marching out of a door Albus had not even noticed the existence of before, was an Egyptian-looking wizard who looked like an identical copy of Ra. The only notable physical difference was a slight scaring on his forehead.

Magically, they had nothing in common. The Archmage was Light, glorious, illuminating, reassuring, and strengthening by his mere presence. This monster...was nothing of the sort. It was the darkness of the deepest abysses, the First Dark Lord, the very stuff of nightmares, and the reason why one feared the Dark.

“He has come in person.” Albus couldn’t help but shiver hearing his ally’s voice tremble for the first time.

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There were some truths which could sum-up this day of surprises. The Tournament had begun. Susan was beautiful in her dress, even if it had a Gryffindor theme. The Basilisk-Slayer, like every other competitor, still knew little about the First Task, save that she had to recover a golden cup.

And the monsters had all decided to come out of the woods for this ceremony.

The presence of several Knights of the Exchequer had been anticipated, though in this crowd, it was hard to assert their identity with a high degree of confidence.

The King of the Exchequer allowing them to see his malevolent aura had not figured in the program of festivities, or if it had, Alexandra had completely missed it.

It was...hell, it was the same as Ra, but for the Dark. There were Lords and Ladies of Magic, and then there was that. These millennia-old Avatars weren’t playing in the same dimension as mortal wizards and witches.

Assuming they chose to reveal their full aura – which was a ridiculous idea – it was likely they could break entire armies and citadels before beginning to feel exhaustion.

At least there was the confirmation the Archmage and his nemesis were brothers. Their looks were far too close to being identical for it to be a coincidence.

“Ah, the Dark Fossil has just arrived. I suppose old age forced him to oversleep.”

The Potter Heiress wondered if she shouldn’t try to put the maximum of distance between Loki’s Champion and herself once more. The Morrigan knew it had been a good tactic so far before the Opening Ceremony...unfortunately, it had not lasted.

“You shouldn’t provoke him, Heiress Romanov.”

“Why?” the lips covered in black lipsticks opened in a wolfish smile. “According to the rumours, you irritated the Light fossil. Why shouldn’t I do the same for the Dark one?”

“Perhaps because at the rhythm you make enemies, soon they will be able to form entire regiments to hunt you?”

“Only regiments?” The Russian Champion bared her teeth...pointed teeth. “I really have to step up my game.”

The worst part was...the green-eyed Ravenclaw had a feeling the Fenrir Animagus was completely serious.

“You’re completely insane...but I suppose that goes with serving Chaos, no?”

“At last, someone who sees the truth...” Lyudmila clicked her fingers and Astrid Sverre behind her gave her a champagne flute. Her Norwegian cousin raised both eyebrows in silent warning as the blonde emptied the flute of its alcoholic content before escaping in the crowd. “I propose to you a little competition. Assuming that the Dark Fossil wishes to keep up separate for the First Task-“

“I am not going to help you destroy the Coliseum or brutalise whatever plans the Exchequer have in store for this Tournament.”

Now that she had seen the chief monster in person, Alexandra knew where her priorities were. As dangerous as fighting the Dark Queen was, at least she was only seventeen. Osiris was older than sin and far more powerful. If she had to choose between being a target of the King of the Exchequer and Lyudmila Romanov, the wielder of Fragarach didn’t need a moment of reflection.

“Wimp,” the Heiress of the Russian Imperial House for the first time threw her a disdainful glance. “You better pray your Goddess we don’t find ourselves in the arena at the same time.”

The black-clad Dark Queen turned around and marched towards a part of the vast hall where Durmstrang students had gathered.

Alexandra waited a few seconds before breathing in relief. Seconds after she did, another Dark Champion made a curt nod of greetings, this one projecting a far less antagonistic presence.

“Champion Potter.”

“Champion Sforza.”

The daughter of the Scuola Regina’s Headmistress had not looked to the expense for her red robe. Between the rubies and the fact the material of the dress was obviously not something a non-magical dressmaker had available in his shops, the Succubus wore something that would likely bankrupt several families. The effect was spectacular...but she wasn’t Susan.

“I see you had the ‘honour’ of speaking with Heiress Lyudmila Romanov.”

“I have. It is not the first time...and I doubt it will be the last.” Alexandra sighed in exaggeration. “But let’s not speak of depressing subjects, please. Life is too short, and whatever happens in the days to come, I doubt the insanity of a certain Champion of Chaos will change.”

The Venetian witch chuckled.

“Indeed. In that case, I wondered...did you like my mosaics?”

After a moment of incomprehension, Alexandra realised the other Champion was speaking of the mosaics she had admired in ‘her’ villa.

“Err...yes, yes. Forgive me, but I thought our new residences had been realised by professional artists...”

“You flatter the students of this school. While some things were done by adults, save a few minor exceptions, the artwork of your rooms, the furniture, and many decorations were the year-projects of every student’s Art class to be delivered no later than June.”

Well, it explained how the Scuola Regina had been able to find so many artists in so little time. Still, for so many student-painters, student-cabinetmakers, and other artists to be found in the same school...

“You seem surprised. Does Hogwarts not provide a class of sculpture, painting, or one of the other noble arts? I know for certain Beauxbatons has several, including music and gardening creations.”

Alexandra heard the implicit message behind the polite question. Beauxbatons and the Scuola Regina: 1, Hogwarts: 0.

“I’m afraid not. Or if it does have them, I never received the list of instructions to register for one.”

“Awful,” and by the hint of vehemence in her voice, the Succubus seemed to truly take it as a personal insult. “We will have to rectify this as soon as possible. Who knows what kind of artistic talent was not allowed to flourish by the fault of this lacklustre education? If you are willing, I will present you to the Arts department teacher the day after the First Task.”

“Only after the First Task?” Alexandra commented with an ironic turn of voice.

“Our teachers have accepted the arguments of my mother they defer class acceptance until the Champions of foreign schools have proven their skill, yes.”

“Prudent,” especially in the case of a few wizards, the name of Cassius Warrington coming to mind. “Since the subject was spoken about, what classes do your school propose at your age? Just my curiosity getting the better of me.”

“Well, we have the same core classes as you, I suppose, then there are Enchanting, Dark Arts, Light Arts, Wards...”

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Most of the afternoon ceremonies didn’t last long from Alexandra’s view. Every journalist present seemed to want her photo for their newspaper as she was the youngest of the sixteen Champions, and yes, by journalists, the Basilisk-Slayer included Nigel and Luna in the lot.

As a result, the interlude between the official interviews and the photo sessions were spent emptying glasses of various fruit juices and finding a seat to rest her feet. The heels were making her taller than she was, but after half a day of them, it was lucky for these shoes they were so valuable. The green-eyed witch was already more than tempted to cast a fire spell on them.

“Your ICW liaison-wizard is coming this way,” Lady Stella Zabini told her as Alexandra was casting a sound-dampening Charm around her surroundings. This Opening Ceremony was a whirlwind of illusions, beautiful things, and important people. But no one would deny it was extremely loud too. “If you feel too tired, I can make an excuse. The formal points have been done, and several Champions have already left.”

Stella Zabini was right on that, since Romanov and two other Champions were nowhere in sight...with the unfortunate consequence for Victor Krum that the journalists and influential wizards were literally making a long queue to talk to him.

“No, it’s fine,” sure, the Potter Heiress had zero choice in the choice of this ICW delegate, but since the man was going to be a permanent figure for the next months, their mutual relationships wouldn’t exactly begin on a good note if avoiding him was her first reaction. “Only him, though.”

The black-haired Ravenclaw had seen her mother in the crowd, but there had been no time for more than a few words. Apparently, every teacher and personnel of the Scuola Regina who was not on stage to present a pretty face was running ragged to make sure the spectacle was flawless.

Given that so far Alexandra hadn’t noticed a single problem, their cultural victory was total.

Standing on her feet again, Alexandra greeted the Indian wizard, and realising the man was quite likely something impossible to categorise. Not because he wore a turban – though the Hindus called it a pagadi if what she had read about Indian magical cultures was correct. No, the reason the wizard looking to be in his fifties was attracting a lot of attention was undoubtedly the King Cobra present on his shoulders.

“Your Exalted Highness,” Alexandra began as Lady Zabini had whispered to her the correct form of address. She was unprepared for the answer.

“Your Exalted Holiness, Sword of the End,” the long-bearded wizard saluted in a far more distinguished fashion.

The Morrigan’s Champion didn’t need more than a few seconds to acknowledge the man had saluted her not as a Champion, but as the Champion of Death. Add the ring of gold representing a dharmapala...

“You are a follower of Yama.” Alexandra affirmed in French.

God and sovereign of the dead, Sovereign of the Hells, Aspect of Death for the Hindu pantheon, much like Hades held its role for the Greek one.

“I am, Champion Potter,” the dark-skinned man replied in a formal – and louder – voice as several dozens of eyes turned in their direction. “I trust you understand why I asked the ICW to become your liaison?”

“I understand,” the green-eyed wielder of Fragarach assured him, “that you have your own goals, in addition to the usual bragging rights.”

“Of course,” the black-scaled King Cobra hissed his greetings, but Alexandra didn’t answer back. For all the Venetians’ tolerance of Parseltongue, she was not yet ready to reveal her Animagus form to the competition. “Since we haven’t yet been presented, allow me to remedy that: I am Raja X Wodeyar, Maharaja of Mysore, and obviously representative of my own domains at the ICW.”

“You forgot a ‘great admirer of snake species’,” Alexandra said with a touch of humour.

“Ah, you noticed? Yes, I will admit I am a...collector of rare and interesting magical species. I regularly send my zoologists across the world to protect endangered animals and safeguard them.”

“This is...generous of you. And you must have quite a zoo.”

“In all humility, I believe I have the largest zoo in existence, both in the magical and the mundane world,” the Maharaja smiled while caressing his long snake right behind the head, something which generated a hiss of pleasure. “I will be happy to present it to you, if it is your desire.”

“Thank you...but for the moment, your Exalted Highness, I am going to focus on the Trials of the Tournament.” As interesting as a visit to Mysore would be – Alexandra was going to assume it was made in good faith for now – there was simply no time for it this year. Perhaps if there had been three contests for the whole year, it may have been possible...but there were far more than that. And with a Trial every month, or so close for it to not make any difference, the European Magical Tournament was the absolute priority.

“A wise and understandable choice,” the Indian noble assured her. “I am afraid I won’t be of any use for the First Task. I heard rumours several menageries were contacted by House Sforza to provide dangerous animals, but mine weren’t among them.”

“I suppose they felt it would have created...conflicts of self-interest?” The Potter Heiress voiced diplomatically.

The Indian wizard laughed gregariously.

“Indeed! I can confess I am also an inveterate gambler...and I wish you good luck for the training which will allow you to win the First Task!”

Well...at least her ICW liaison believed in her both because she was a Champion of Death and due to his addiction for gambling. For her good conscience, Alexandra was going to thank him for the former and not much for the latter...

**3 November 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

Alexandra had been slightly worried about the name ‘Wand Ceremony’. After hours of journalist time and more ceremonies than was healthy for a witch, having one more was not something the Champion of the Morrigan expected to be tranquil and restful.

She had been wrong so far. In front of two judges, the only thing the Basilisk-Slayer had to do so far was reveal what heirlooms/artefacts/weapons and other magical objects she intended to use in the Tournament Tasks.

There had been no difficulties, even when she had placed Fragarach in front of them.

“Your Runic Tablets are verified and accepted,” the Japanese Judge who had presented himself under the name of Hanayo Komachi nodded as she levitated said items back into her trunk. Wrinkled and thin, the wizard looked so old Dumbledore might be a youngster compared to him. His hair and long beard were certainly white enough to challenge the Defeater of Grindelwald in a ‘grandfather’ contest. He was also a Light wizard, his aura was one of a man having dabbled in it for time to time. As for what had made him famous, the elder wizard had not chosen to reveal it. “Anything else?”

“No, your Honour.”

“Then it is time to bring this inspection to an end,” the other Judge said amicably. While the Japanese wizard was old and decrepit, Ernesto Fernandes looked in his thirties and appeared to be vibrant of life. Brown-haired and blue-eyed, showing a muscular body, he had presented himself as a Master of Herbology. “Now for the choices we are allowed to give you before the First Task begins.”

Alexandra stopped smiling. Of course there would be more than met the eye.

“Each Champion will have the possibility of asking for an item which will provide some protection in the arena he or she will face on the fifth of November,” Hanayo explained in a weak and trembling voice. It probably didn’t help French was not his first language. “Doing so however will cost the Champion five points.”

“This will be five points no matter what score you obtain,” the Brazilian Judge clarified, “so yes, before you ask, negative scores are definitely possible if you aren’t careful.”

“I see.” The Ravenclaw Champion made up her mind in one second: no protective item. Honestly, it wasn’t like it would give an insurmountable defence against all Champions. Furthermore, sacrificing five percent of your grade before the first spell was cast sounded stupid. “You mentioned choices, plural?”

“Ah, yes. The second choice you will have is to take a secondary magical focus or item with you during the First Task. Doing so will cost you ten points.”

After hearing that, Alexandra was more convinced than ever that not counting on any kind of help was *the* good decision. Seriously, any help a weapon could provide was helpful...but what good would it do when the Judges gave their scores? They could earn one hundred points maximum, and Alexandra didn’t know about other students, but she had only twice earned perfect scores during her end-of-the-year exams.

There were more ‘choices’ presented, and all were in the same league: go and face the First Task with a quantity of heirlooms and life-saving things, knowing that even if you did crush the opposition, your number of points was going to be close to zero when it was over.

“I thank you, your Honour...but I have no intention to asking for any kind of material help. I will enter the First Task with my wand and nothing else.”

Ernesto Fernandes shrugged.

“This isn’t in my power to acknowledge. The referee will ask you to confirm your choices after explaining to you what the First task is in two days.”

Clever. Clever and sadistic. Did they hire Professor Flitwick for this Tournament, or receive lessons from him?

With a calm head and not knowing what they were going to face into the Arena, it was certain all Champions would make the same decision as she today.

But in the Coliseum itself? With a crowd of tens of thousands booing and cheering? With the referee telling them exactly what the First Task was?

Yeah, there were good odds at least a few Champions were going to panic.

“My answer will stay the same.” The two Judges were too polite to smirk, but the light in their eyes clearly meant ‘we will see in two days’.

Locking her trunk, the black-haired Champion left the room where the Judges had examined her possessions, and silently nodded to Roger Davies who was waiting ten steps down in the waiting hall. Yes, the substitute Champions passed the ‘Wand Ceremony’ too.

“All right?” the older Ravenclaw boy asked.

“All right,” she answered. “This shouldn’t take very long. You won’t receive any ‘choices’ for the First Task.”

“See you at dinner, then.”

Alexandra nodded and walked at a fast pace, levitating her trunk behind her. The order to pass in front of the Judges had not been chosen in alphabetical order or by Champion’s age, it was first arrived, first served, and Hermione and Morag had left long before she did.

Thus all she had was to do was to go to an Apparition point, Apparate, and leave Fragarach and the rest of her magical arsenal and foci inside her villa where no one was going to steal them – trying and getting caught, aside from the risk posed by the wards themselves, was grounds for instant disqualification and a prison sentence. Champions had diplomatic immunity for all the European Tournament, and the Roman-style villas were their personal embassies.

“Potter! Hey, Potter!”

Alexandra considered it an example of self-control to not grit her teeth, grimace, or cast a spell when hearing this impolite and arrogant voice.

Fortunately, recognising a voice and acknowledging it were two very different things.

Unfortunately, the problem was tenacious and began to run in pursuit.

“Hey, I’m speaking to you!” Leo Black shouted as he finally managed to catch up with her and tried to touch her trunk, likely in a vain attempt to ensure the Potter Heiress acknowledged his existence.

It was a terrible idea. The runes shining on her trunk were not there to be pretty.

His hand stayed on her trunk for too long, and the irascible Gryffindor was blasted ten metres away. The Venetian students who witnessed the scene began to laugh.

“That was the first part of my new Rune-based defences, Black. Care to test the second?” It would likely not kill him, but the electrocution would certainly teach him not to touch her trunks and possessions...at least Alexandra hoped. Where Leo Black was concerned, nothing could be dismissed. It had reached a point where the Basilisk-Slayer secretly believed the son of Sirius Black was a masochist.

“I don’t know what you said to Neville, but-“

“I haven’t spoken to Champion Longbottom in the last forty-eight hours, Black.”

It was very satisfying to watch as the Gryffindor gaped and stuttered.

“Leo? What by Merlin’s pants are you doing?”

Like magic had conjured him, the Boy-Who-Lived had turned the corner, followed by two other Light Champions...Henri de Condé and Eleonora de Riva, if she wasn’t mistaken.

“Well, this was very amusing, but I have other things to do.”

“Actually,” the voice of the French Champion echoed in the hall. “We were wondering if we could request a few minutes of your time.”

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Of all the privileges being granted to the true Champions of the Tournament, one of the few Neville didn’t envy them was the permission to take one of the large gondolas any time they wanted. Yes, yes, it was one of the rare things which allowed you to converse with trustworthy people without risk of being overheard, but all this water around him was putting him ill-at-ease. His Animagus form – which was barely recognised and at least a year away from being under control, never mind mastered – could not swim, and while the Boy-Who-Lived had enough swimming skill to not drown in the first pond, on a large river like this one, his chances of survival wouldn’t be very good.

“Err...I apologise for Leo’s actions.”

The green eyes of Alexandra Potter stared at him. They were sufficiently intimidating for him to swallow nervously.

“Why?” The Champion of House Ravenclaw and Death asked in what was certainly a rhetorical question. “Unless this whole scene was a grand conspiracy to meet me, you played no part in this Black fiasco. And it is rather useless to apologise for someone when he won’t change his mind. The loss of his pocket money apparently wasn’t a strong enough warning.”

“I’m sure Leo will get better...when he has properly grieved for his father.”

“I’m rather sure of the contrary, in fact.” With the wind flowing into the valley, Potter had never looked more beautiful...and dangerous. “Let’s be blunt, Longbottom. In the unlikely case Heir Leo Black survives this Tournament in a state which will allow him to walk and procreate, Bellatrix Black-Lestrange hasn’t exactly been subtle in her intentions. The moment he isn’t a guest of the Scuola Regina anymore, the son of the unlamented Sirius Black is going to be struck by several tragic and unprecedented accidents. So if he doesn’t change his ways very soon, he won’t live to reach sixteen.”

“You advise he apologises and bows to the woman who killed his father?”

The Potter Heiress rolled her shoulders and made a loud sound with her tongue.

“Ideally, my first step would be to get pragmatic and first stop antagonising every Dark wizard and witch he meets. Learning some manners and becoming non-confrontational when introduced in high society would be a good start too. But I’m not him, fortunately...and I don’t want to continue speaking about that imbecile. You can transmit the message I won’t tolerate any hostile act from him, Longbottom. If we face each other in the Coliseum, I will end him.”

Neville shivered, and not just because he knew the voice was so iron-clad it couldn’t possibly be a bluff.

“Now that this matter is settled, you requested a moment of my time, Champions of the Light. So speak.”

“We want to establish an alliance with you against the Exchequer and Lyudmila Romanov,” Henri began in a firm and decisive voice.

For the first time in this gondola journey, the words brought a smile to Potter’s face and lips.

“No offence, but I think your priorities are in the wrong order. The First Task is coming in two days. Not knowing the specifics, there’s a limited chance we will all be thrown into the arena at the same time. The Exchequer’s Knights won’t be there with us. On the other hand, Loki’s Champion will.”

“I doubt Headmistress Sforza wants a massacre for the First task,” Eleonora countered calmly.

The sentence generated a cold sound from Alexandra Potter.

“What she wants doesn’t matter, Champion of Innocence,” the youngest of the sixteen Champions replied. “Now that all the pieces of the game have entered the trap, it is the King Himself who plays against us. And you don’t pour millions into an international Tournament if you aren’t ready to bloody your hands. Still, I take your point.”

She did? Well, it was good news-

“If it’s sixteen Champions in the same arena, there’s one hundred percent chance we will fight Romanov. If it’s four-by-four, the odds fall to twenty-five percent. Assuming we’re going individually, we won’t fight her.”

“Good odds,” Neville coughed, receiving a nod of approval from Eleonora...and a look of pity from Potter.

“By the ashes of Camlann, you are completely...innocent, aren’t you?”

It was Henri de Condé who took the lead again.

“You fear her.”

“The second time I met her in person, the Dark Queen butchered an entire contingent of Exchequer’s prisoners just because she was *bored*. Anyone not frightened by that needs to visit a Mind-Healer to check if there isn’t something wrong with him or her.”

“No one is invincible,” the Champion of Horus said pointedly.

For a few seconds, Alexandra Potter stayed nearly immobile, the only signs she had not been transformed into a statue were her hands plunging into the water of the river.

“Loki gave her Fenrir for an Animagus form. In a straight-up fight, this gives her an overwhelming advantage against a wide range of opponents, including Champions of Magic. I don’t know how to kill her.”

Coming from someone chosen by Death, it was...not good, not good at all.

“I’m afraid before any prospect of alliance can be entertained, I must be sure you are going to last more than a few seconds in the First Task. Make a good showing, and I will accept a second conversation next week. If you don’t...I will see your souls earlier.”

And the worst part was that Neville didn’t know if the Ravenclaw fourth-year would be sorry or not at such an outcome...

**4 November 1994**, **Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

Morag didn’t know who had decided to build private pools for the sixteen Champions, but there should be a hell waiting for them. They hadn’t yet been here for a full week, and Alexandra was already spending half of her villa time in it.

“If it continues like this, your training for the Tournament is going to suffer,” the MacDougal Heiress said to her friend, noticing immediately that the Hydra Animagus had chosen a particularly nice green one-piece swimsuit today. Say what you want about Lady Zabini, but her choices in matters of clothes and everything fashionable were rarely wrong.

“Nonsense,” Alexandra jumped out of the water in an impressive acrobatic move few humans would have been able to imitate. “I am training for the First Task.”

“By swimming and working on your sun tan?” The Ravenclaw redhead inquired.

“No, not the latter...but definitely the former.”

“Alexandra, I seriously doubt the organisers have in mind a swimming competition inside the Coliseum.”

“Why not?” the raven-haired girl asked seriously. “Hermione checked, and there’s apparently a name for it: naumachia. The definition is literally ‘staging of naval battles as mass entertainment’.”

Morag told her to stop being ridiculous. As good as the Enchanters and the other Venetian wizards and witches were, the probability of them being able to create a magical structure which would be able to hold tens of thousands of tons of water was completely ridiculous.

So ridiculous that-

“What would be the point?” Morag managed to articulate in a voice she hoped wasn’t too weak. “I mean, it’s the Exchequer we are talking about, and it’s more or less an organisation of Dark Lords and Dark Ladies who want to achieve world domination. But this kind of magic-engineering would easily triple the cost of the Coliseum. Why would they do that?”

“At first the idea seemed ridiculous,” Alexandra agreed. “As you said, what exactly would be the point? Whether they pick a Kraken over an adult Dragon, the spectacle might not be superior from a spectator’s viewpoint. It was Eleonora de Riva who gave me the first clue.”

“The Champion of Innocence?”

“Yes. She mentioned how her Headmistress would want to limit the number of casualties. And since, after all, as a Light Champion she is hardly what one might call a supporter of the Dark, I told myself, ‘if it’s true, why?’”

Morag didn’t take long to arrive at an unpleasant answer.

“They want some of the original Champions to survive several Tasks to accomplish their goals. Certainly to fulfil the conditions of whatever Ritual was activated at the Opening Ceremony.”

“Pretty much my thoughts,” the Ravenclaw Champion smiled. “Of course, if I was a paranoiac Dark Lady or Dark Lord, I would immediately see there’s a problem. The Champions of the Light are a bit too weak to have a chance of killing a significant number of opponents, so the real danger would come from Lyudmila Romanov.”

“Oh.” Morag was definitely gaping...and she didn’t care. “You think...you think this may be an attempt to drown the Dark Queen before she can cause problems.”

Alexandra nodded darkly, not a trace of her previous smiles remaining.

“Durmstrang is a land-locked school, I checked. And Romanov didn’t use the sea to invade the Exchequer’s holiday island, she must have used her Chaos version of Pandemonium as a travel method like me. Hermione is trying to find the relevant Norse texts right now, but there’s no mention of Fenrir being able to swim.”

“Assuming this is true,” the Irish pure-blood carefully chose her words. “It still may not be enough. I remember reading one of my Care of Magical Creatures’ book at home which said certain species of wolves in the New World adapted rather easily to a life close to the sea, in the imperatives of survival. It would be...surprising for Fenrir to not have the same ability.”

“Or for Romanov to not have developed a few spells to counter this enormous weakness,” Alexandra approved. “The Dark Tower knows that after realising how big a disadvantage I would be at by not knowing how to swim, I made enormous efforts to remove the issue. So yes, this plan to ‘kill the Dark Queen’ won’t be enough. That’s why if I wanted a guarantee of destroying her, I would put her against three Champions of Magic eager to remove her from the board, plus a giant sea monster invulnerable to the poisons of the giant wolf.”

“So that’s why you mentioned the Kraken.” Morag didn’t comment on the Champions: it was obvious Alexandra would be among the three.

“It fits what the Exchequer would choose.”

“I will remark to you there’s not a lot of proof to support your theory, however.”

“Really?” Alexandra said sarcastically. “Why then were the illusions of the Opening Ceremony based on an elemental theme of Fire, Earth, Air, and Water?”

The Irish Heiress grimaced.

“You are in for an apocalyptic fight tomorrow, then.”

“Yes,” the Hydra Animagus stretched and transfigured her skin into scales, “but for once the odds are against someone else.”

**Author’s note**: The next chapter will be the First Task, just saying.

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