**Chapter 98**

**The Carnival Laws**

**12 January 1995, The Villa of the Lake, somewhere in Alexandria, Egypt**

Eleonora breathed in relief when the blindfold was removed. No matter how much confidence she had in her guide, having one of her senses limited or hindered in some way always put her ill-at-ease.

Whether this was something that had already been part of her or it came as one of the few problems of having a magical inner animal to transform herself into was something she had never managed to truly ascertain.

Anyway, as her vision was free, the Champion of Innocence watched as the Champion of Death closed a stone door with one hand which had to weigh tons.

What followed a few seconds later was even more interesting. Instead of picking a key and locking the voluminous protection, it was a sizeable but absolutely exquisite Ankh of gold which was levitated.

Runic combinations way more complicated than anything Eleonora was able to solve appeared in flaming emerald letters on the stone's surface – part of the magic was coming from the Ankh, but the power also came from the emerald diadem Alexandra Potter wore upon her head.

Even with these two artefacts, the Champion of the Scuola Regina knew she wouldn't have been able to solve the locking combination which was no doubt proposed. Runes had never been her strongest class – her quick elimination during the Second Task was not a mistake – but it was not difficult to recognise the work of a Rune Master.

Any student, male or female, Venetian or foreigner, would be heavily challenged to solve that Rune enigma. Hieroglyphs were, for excellent reasons, reported to be an extremely time-intensive and esoteric field for a reason.

It posed no problem whatsoever to the black-haired British girl, who solved it in less than ten seconds.

"Err...not that I'm going to press you, but the Ankh-"

"It was offered to me as a gift by the end of my second year, when I killed two Basilisks in the Battle of the Chamber of Secrets." The green-eyed witch frowned as she cast a spell to switch on the light enchantments of the corridor that the two of them had entered. "That was one and a half years ago."

The deadly slayer of beasts and wizards didn't explain where she had found the diadem; everyone had seen her receive it at the end of the First Task.

"They gave you the key to...to this place while you weren't even allied to them?"

"They did." Alexandra Potter shrugged. "Really, when you look back at it, they didn't take a big risk. Without the enchanted emeralds, the Ankh is functionally useless. And the reverse is also true. When I came here the first time last week, I was unable to open the door; I didn't know I needed the Ankh. And even if I had had both a year ago...well, I needed the coordinates. It isn't exactly easy to discover this enchanted door without the coordinates and the Queen of the Exchequer's directions."

"I...yes, it makes sense." It was one of the oldest tactics of the Exchequer; promise safety and treasures to a particularly promising wizard or witch, when the Light had already done a good job impressing upon he or she the fact Ra wanted all Dark Champions dead, and the sooner, the better. "Where are we, by the way?"

There was a large stair built in some grey stone, ancient, but pristine and rather noble in aspect. And in the distance, there was light which wasn't provided by the enchantments activated by the other Champion.

"Ah, yes, that's right. Champion Eleonora da Riva, welcome to the not-so-humble Villa of the Lake."

Leaving the corridor, they arrived on what would be normally be a very highly elevated first floor, in the fashion of Spanish noble residences, with arches and Oriental blue-white mosaics.

And where the floor stopped, there was a golden-black rail to stop anyone from falling, and beyond that...

Well, below them, there was an enormous lake. Eleonora wished she could have said it was a pool, but if this was one, it was way bigger than any swimming pool she had ever heard of.

No, it was a small lake.

There was a small secret lake, built in an enchanted and completely underground cavern where no person lacking magic would ever be able to find it.

And all around it was built a splendid palace, with on the floor below them enormous statues representing Bastet, the Egyptian Goddess of Cats.

"This is...immense."

And it suddenly made sense why only the diadem had been offered after the end of the First Task. That sort of gift would have raised a lot of questions the moment it was offered.

"It is." The younger girl admitted with a giggle.

"Can I have a guided tour?"

This brought a grimace on her host's face.

"If you insist, but I would prefer to do it another day. This promises to be long, and you wouldn't find it very exciting anyway."

"How so?" Eleonora asked, wondering why the Champion of Death was so reluctant.

"This is only the second time I'm visiting the Villa of the Lake," Alexandra Potter said. "And though the Exchequer leadership was generous enough to give me the villa, their gifts have limits. The villa is magically enchanted to not gather dust and has a strong and beautiful Egyptian theme, but it stops there. There are no tables, beds, or the rest of the furniture one needs to live here."

"Ah." Eleonora was disappointed for several seconds...but then figured she would get the tour, eventually...she hoped. And besides, Alexandra Potter didn't sound too bothered. With reason, the Champion of Innocence supposed.

"Yes, this is...logical? I'm not an expert in the price of first-class magical manors and extraordinary residences, but I wouldn't be surprised if the basic value of the 'Villa of the Lake' was..." a quick calculus to convert the necessary gold in British Galleons made her pause for a moment, "if it was on the market, it would certainly not be sold at less than five million Galleons."

The Runic wards and the enchantments woven in the stones, the splendid and idyllic lake of tantalising water...yes, there were powerful nobles and non-nobles who would sell their souls and empty their pockets to live here.

"And now I feel even more overwhelmed by the generosity of the one who gave it to me," the half-ironic reply came. "Let's descend to see the lake closer."

As they took a new series of stairs, the majesty of the palace was ever increasing. Their footsteps, though hardly loud, were like miniatures on the perfect association of stones which at some point had shifted from blue-white to green-white.

And the lake...once they were a few steps away from it, there was an unreasonable temptation – which had nothing to do with magic – to jump and enjoy a long swimming session where one was sure to be near-alone and undisturbed.

In a way, it was better to focus on...on the important things, so not to abandon her clothes and submerge herself in this private paradise.

"You realise no one is offers this sort of gift without secret motives, right?"

The snort from the Champion of Death was particularly loud and unimpressed.

"Is it secret if the Queen of the Exchequer already revealed several of the reasons before giving me this villa?"

Eleonora blinked.

"And what could possibly..." The Light Champion didn't finish her own sentence. In a way, it was incredibly evident. She didn't know why no one of the Army of Light had said it out loud before today. Champion of the Morrigan. Wielder of Mordred's blade. Okay, they had missed the Alexandria connection, since they weren't aware of this underground palace, but it wasn't an excuse.

The new libraries and the other fortified places of knowledge the 'official' government of Egypt had built were there, in Alexandria itself. Where else would the ex-Champion of the Morrigan find suitable to teach her successor?

"You seem to have realised what I was offered." To her relief, the green eyes were more amused than angry.

"I suppose it is wasting my saliva to tell you to reconsider your choices?"

"For the record, I haven't accepted to do anything in or anywhere near Alexandria." This was very surprising...but it was the good sort of surprise she didn't expect. "No matter how tempting it is each time the fanatics of the Army of Light try to kill me or prove they're the bigger evil for me and my friends."

Eleonora da Riva grimaced. What could she possibly say to that?

"But you had reasons to invite me to this lovely location today."

"Yes." The Champion of Death admitted grudgingly. "I have decided to...agree to the Queen's suggestion and do my best to win the Fourth Task as part of the Night Court."

Pretty much what Henri and she had already feared, then.

"You realise," the Champion of Innocence said slowly and in a carefully calm tone, "that they haven't told you everything."

"I am not naive." The younger witch bit her lip before giving her a mocking smile. "And I was able to negotiate pledges of security for my friends and their immediate families. Or will you tell me the Exchequer won't uphold its promises?"

That question was a trap if there ever was one.

"No." Eleonora sighed. "If *they* really want you to help them, if the assurances and oath-pledges you hint of have been made...the Avatar of Darkness and his greatest lieutenants will do their utmost to respect their word. The Great Darkness and his most powerful wizards and witches have many flaws and can slaughter entire cities filled with innocents for some incomprehensible motive, but once they give their word, it is absolute."

She tried to push for some levity in this difficult conversation.

"I had fears something like that was in the works...what little Innocence was attached to you is gone. And I was pretty sure it wasn't because of the sex you had with your redhead lover."

For the first time, the Venetian Champion saw the Champion of Death blushing and show her an expression of...mortification.

"Sweet Goddess..."

"It wasn't difficult to see...I mean, the rumours when you're nowhere in sight at school are very close to the truth...you and your lover aren't exactly discreet."

The loud hiss she heard...Eleonora didn't speak Parseltongue, but she was pretty sure that was an insult.

"Fine," Alexandra Potter huffed twice more...before changing the subject in a very direct manner. "Let's leave my innocence or the lack of it out of this conversation. I invited you here to see if you were fine helping me win. Out of all the six Champions of the Night Court, you're the only one to be sworn to a Power of the Light."

"And what would you do if I said no?" Eleonora asked warily.

"Leave you in a comfortable palace for fifteen days," the answer was immediate and there was no hesitation in the tone of the young witch. "I would certainly ask the...benefactors of this Tournament to hide you under a complicated illusion so that no one of the two other Courts finds you."

Yes...yes, she could see it happening. And the public would be sold a convincing explanation too. Eleonora would be the secret weapon of the Night Court, always hidden to make sure the Day and the Doge forces didn't achieve a complete victory, no matter how total the defeat.

"If you do that, you will be in an even more complicated situation than the Judges' rules call for."

"That goes without saying," the green eyes continued to stare at her implacably no matter how neutral the expression of the female visage. "But if you don't want to be on my side when the Dark does its best to defeat the Light, I am not going to force you. I am smart enough to understand that going on that path would be a recipe for a huge disaster before the Carnival's end."

"On that point, I completely agree with you."

Eleonora wished she could say she did hesitate for one hour or that the dilemma was such that she demanded days to make her decision.

But she didn't hesitate.

What Falk had done to her...how little remorse the bastard had shown when he had tried to kill her for nothing but a small gain of time that he had properly wasted minutes later...

Yes, she was the Champion of Innocence.

But Innocence with Vesta meant she had to keep her virginity and refuse to attack first.

She was to be a Champion which would make this world better.

She was ordered to not give offence to anyone and absolutely forbidden to attack first, be it magically or non-magically.

Falk and his superiors – who had technically been hers too – were thinking that it meant that as long as she didn't die, she would let live and forget.

Well, they could take their absolutely ridiculous sense of self-righteousness, and place it where the sun didn't shine.

"I am with you. But I have conditions, of course..."

**12 January 1995, Zabini Manor, England**

Stella Zabini smiled as she watched her ward cut the expertly cooked meat before placing a piece delicately on a silver fork...and a voracious little golden dragon made sure it 'disappeared' incredibly fast.

Obviously, the rest of the meat didn't stay long on its plate.

The second steak brought by one of her House Elves was eaten in far less time than the first.

The eagerness and the vigorous appetite faded away, alas, when the food ceased to be meat.

"But I don't want to!"

"You will eat everything, Fingolfin, or I won't read for you tonight!"

"No, I want to listen to you!"

"Then eat!"

There was much protestation from the Britannian Gold, but the young dragon acknowledged the inevitable after several minutes and devoured his lunch...though there was much grumbling about the taste of vegetables.

Finally, after a few minutes of conversation, Fingolfin closed his eyes on his reinforced couch-seat. A few seconds later, the familiar sound of draconic snoring arrived to their ears.

"If it could be replicated, the ability of dragons to fall asleep when and where they want would earn a fortune to whoever discovered it."

"Yes," Alexandra agreed with some...melancholy. "But this is part of their unique magic, right? Otherwise, I'm sure some mage would have invented something to create a magical talent out of it. We wouldn't rely on Charms or Potions..."

"Indeed." The Black Widow finished the cooking creations of her employees and abandoned her fork and knife. "You're wise for your age."

Stella received an amused expression for her compliment.

"Sometimes I wish I could be a bit more innocent and selfish...busy with the problems most of the teenagers deal with at fourteen or fifteen." This was not spoken as a complaint but as a fact. "But what is done is done. And I have gained an adorable dragon in the bargain."

"You certainly did," the Head of the British branch of House Zabini assured her green-eyed ward. "Were there other reasons for you to come eat here today? I'm always happy to share a lunch with you, Alexandra, but you don't usually make a habit of it."

And this was completely normal. Between classes and preparations for the Tournament Tasks, it was far better if Alexandra did live and speak with persons of her own generation. Her presence at Zabini Manor was essentially to visit Fingolfin and all of the small menagerie she owns...including a snobbish and petulant 'Ciri'.

"There are," Lily's daughter admitted while caressing the golden scales of her sleeping dragon. "The first is obviously I may not be able to don all the costumes you prepared for me. The Judges' big revelations come tomorrow, and a lot may change, but I am pretty sure I am going to need to establish some sort of strategy with the other Champions...and trying to impress the crowd is not the goal anymore."

"Good point," Stella Zabini nodded. "Don't underestimate the possibility of hiding in plain sight. I will keep all the costumes at your disposal anyway."

"Thank you."

She could have pursued the topic for the next hour, but as the girl she had accepted to be magical guardian of had said, they didn't know the specifics of the rules the Judges were about to introduce, and thus everything would be idle speculation, most likely discarded twenty-four hours from now.

"The other topic...well, it is to ask you a favour. I wish to have Old Frederick on stand-by here at Zabini Manor...just in case."

"At the risk of saying the obvious, Alexandra, you can't transport Old Frederick from here to Venice by Apparition."

This method of magical transportation had a weight limit, as did International Portkeys. For the life of her, the Black Widow couldn't remember a single time in history someone had managed to use it successfully on a dragon, even a 'semi-domesticated' one.

"I don't want to Apparate him to Venice," her young ward protested immediately. "What would he be useful for anyway? Sinking the city? Breaking the Statute of Secrecy? Spreading panic? Honestly, I can do all three far better than him."

"Then...ah. You have managed to confirm the Chalice of Plagues' rumours from your last letter?"

As cold-blooded as she was, Stella had really hoped it was nothing but an ill-founded rumour.

"I have." The seriousness of the threat brought a dark expression on Alexandra's face. "And I also have an idea how the Exchequer intends to beat the Grail's power if they are unable to stop its activation. They are...they are shrouding the lands of Egypt with some sort of Death-enforced geas. That way the Light will be totally unable to reap a harvest of corpses...but the price is the equivalent of having young Basilisk-like monsters in their backyards."

The Black Widow internally grimaced. Like all of Britain, she had seen the photos of the dead Basilisks Alexandra had slain at the end of her second year. Those were not the kind of beasts you wanted living anywhere near you.

"I see." The Lady of House Zabini tried to reply as calmly as possible. "You want Old Frederick to play the role of magical antidote if it comes to the worst."

"Yes. The Exchequer promised they have something, but I don't think they have ever tested it in battle-conditions. It is possible it won't work. It can be it may work, but the Army of Light will try to destroy the 'cure' before it can be deployed. Anyway, Eleonora da Riva confirmed magical dragons are imbued with supernatural immunity to all diseases and plague epidemics, so on that front, the Queen of the Exchequer's words are credible and verified."

This was a tirade which was both reassuring and worrying.

As for why Alexandra didn't want to include her golden dragon, the answer was incredibly evident; there was no way to know if the immunity of the dragons was reached past a certain age or existing from the moment the egg was cracked. And even if it was the latter, risking the only living member of the Britannian Gold species was incredibly risky.

"Very well, Alexandra. Old Frederick will be brought here, at your disposal. Let's hope you won't need him."

"Yes...hopefully by the Summer Solstice, I will be able to apologise to that green grumbler and he will be given a feast before returning to his favourite spot on your reserve. Hopefully, it will be not necessary..."

There was no need to ask if her ward believed they would be so lucky; the answer was written on her face.

"Two good reasons," Stella spoke as the snoring coming from a certain dragon increased in intensity. "Does the third include making a detour to Hogwarts?"

"As a matter of fact, no," Alexandra shook her head. "I intend to visit a location not far from it, however."

**12 January 1995, somewhere in Scotland**

Dudley saluted when his cousin reached his observation post...and received an unimpressed groan in return.

"Don't do that, cousin. You honestly look ridiculous."

The young wererat sighed. Well, at least no impostor had tried to steal the identity of their supreme leader today.

"Bad day?"

"No, a very pleasant day, truly. It's just that I find your 'Hydra uniforms' absolutely ridiculous."

"Malcolm thought you loved the emerald and green colours..."

"I do. It doesn't mean I find your Navy uniforms amusing past the first glance. It looks like you tried to copy the Royal Navy, except you painted the whole outfit in different shades of green."

Dudley coughed loudly. It was...kind of what had happened? Damn it, he was going to blame Jimmy and Malcolm for that one...

Fortunately, after a brief moment of intimidation, his cousin turned to watch the grey-blue sea northwards.

"But it's your cohort and yourself who will wear those uniforms. If you want to look ridiculous like Marvel comics' villains, who I am to judge?"

Dudley Dursley sighed in relief.

"Anyway, I'm not here for that. Some of my friends introduced illogical rumours about me using a submarine to launch a sneak attack upon the Fourth Task. So I wanted your opinion, given that you followed the last trials of the *HMS Hydra*. Does our Dreadnought have enough range to reach Venice?"

"You want to destroy Venice?" he asked, before putting a hand upon his mouth. Yeah...that was kind of undiplomatic and rude.

"Why does everyone think I want to destroy Venice lately?" Alexandra Potter complained with an annoyed expression.

Dudley coughed loudly and cleared his throat.

"Because everyone has seen what you did during the three first Tasks of the Tournament?"

Seriously, if anyone working on the Dreadnoughts or the nearby warships had thought it was a good idea to betray his cousin, nobody wanted to do it now.

It would be painful and apocalyptic. That much was certain.

"All right," the Hydra Queen hissed. "All right. But no, I don't intend to destroy Venice. If I change my mind during the next Task, I can assure you I won't require a Dreadnought to do it."

Well, that was...totally not reassuring?

"But for now, I want to make sure Venice stays the same as it is. No, the Dreadnought's question was in case I needed an evacuation method. My enemies have...evil abilities which might result in massive casualties. If that happens, I will need to quickly evacuate all the people I care about."

That was better, all right.

Dudley thought a few seconds, calculated some basic numbers...and arrived at an unpleasant conclusion.

"The Dreadnought can reach Venice. That's the good news."

"And the bad news?" his cousin asked, not too displeased or surprised.

"It's going to take a long time. We will need to reload the Runes and everything somewhere between Gibraltar and Venice. And I doubt we can stay more than fifteen-twenty hours on station before being discovered."

And of course there were the warnings of some goblin expert he remembered right now...

"Oh, and we will need more gold. For an exercise, because if you haven't prepared at least once, it's guaranteed plenty of things we didn't anticipate will go wrong."

Alexandra, to his relief, nodded nearly immediately.

"Training is reasonable. You will get the gold you need in two days."

"And I suppose...err...we can evacuate hundreds like that, but we can't evacuate all the people of Venice. During the Carnival, err...I suppose Venice's population doubles?"

"More than that, Dudley, far more than that...especially this year. I wouldn't be surprised if...no, let's be clear, there will be tens of thousands of men and women there. Not all will stay for fifteen days."

His cousin passed a hand through her long black hair, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"But don't worry about that. I don't think we can evacuate Venice with a single Dreadnought. This is a contingency...in case a lot of things go completely wrong."

Well, he was worrying now.

"Any other problems which require my attention?"

"Err...yes. With the numbers of workers and allies we welcomed here...err...it won't be long before the secret of this repair dockyard is out. Assuming it isn't already. Some of the wereleopards we hired last month are very skilled...but they have families elsewhere."

"And the vampires of the Soul Drinkers have the leopards as animals to call."

"Yeah...yes."

His cousin was motionless for a good minute...the only indication she was truly awake being some scales appearing and disappearing on her face.

"I suppose the secret held long enough. Soon it won't matter anymore."

"You think...you think the Statute is going to break that fast?"

His cousin nodded darkly.

"The...certain parties have a lot of interest in destroying the Statute piece by piece, so that the transition to a magical world is as smooth as possible. But the chief enemy is all about 'my way or the world must perish'. I think that when it breaks, it will be...extremely violent."

"Fortunately, we have a few Dreadnoughts."

"Yes, we have." His cousin's lips widened to reveal impressive fangs. "Hydras don't survive because they are nice. They survive because they are able to retaliate no matter how much firepower you throw at them."

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

"You're late."

Alexandra rolled her eyes.

"Good evening to you too, Morag. Did you miss me?"

"Not at all," her red-haired Ravenclaw substitute replied cheerfully. "Not at all. The Scuola Regina is really peaceful when you aren't here. There were no explosions, no Basilisks roaming in the corridors-"

"The Basilisks were one hundred percent Hogwarts' fault...well, Salazar Slytherin and his demented Heir-pretender's fault. I really doubt we will see any Basilisk near Venetia."

Really, if the Styx Vipers or any life-form similar to a Basilisk had an instinct of self-preservation, they would never come near the Scuola Regina and Venetian lands or islands. There were far too many Lord and Lady-level magical practitioners able to kill them for the Dark beasts to have a chance of instigating a reign of terror.

"We got the Leviathan and the Cockatrice for the First Task."

"And last time I checked, they didn't rampage out of the Coliseum, Morag." It was a good reminder though that for the Tasks after the Carnival, they might meet other 'charming' animals above the 'XXXX' classification. "Anyway the reason I'm late is independent of my will. I made a detour to Hogwarts to talk to Daphne, and it happens that the Venetian Carnival and the Winter Ball of this fair Tournament have one point in common."

"Let me guess..." Morag purred loudly, and the sound gave away her efforts to become an Animagus were being slowly but surely rewarded. "Everyone wants to be invited?"

"Everyone wants to be invited," the Potter Heiress confirmed. "I won't say I'm surprised."

"As you should be, oh great Night Queen." With each day of jokes, Alexandra wondered why she had thought winning the Third Task was a great idea.

"Ha. Ha. Ha. It's possibly worse than the Ball, in several ways. At least when it came to the dancing and everything, there was a limit of age..."

"I think there will be one, it's just that it hasn't been announced yet." Morag replied, for once with something looking like seriousness.

Alexandra raised an eyebrow.

Morag grinned.

"Alex, in the last days, we have read several old chronicles of the Carnival with Hermione. Do some activities described within the pages look suitable for eleven-year-old children?"

"No," the Champion of Death acknowledged. "On the other hand, I'm sure pre-Statute Carnivals weren't an excuse to murder each other before dropping the corpses in the canals. Yet that is certainly what is going to happen during the Fourth Task."

This, one might say, resulted in her eyes looking in a very wary manner at the idea of this whole 'Carnival Civil War' or whatever whole name the Judges and the players behind the scene wanted to call it.

"But there isn't anything we can do about it until tomorrow." Alexandra clicked her tongue before taking the fastest path to go to the Library. She had to borrow more books for her nightly reading. "Anything of critical importance happen while I was away?"

"Save Montague kneeling before Longbottom? Nothing much."

Alexandra stared.

Morag stared back...before sticking her tongue out.

"You're a horrible friend," the Ravenclaw Champion complained before shaking her head. "I hope you at least took a photo of the event."

"Of course I did!" the MacDougal Heiress sadistically grinned. "Or rather, I paid a nice Incubus to take one."

"Good enough." Ah, the image of a junior Death Eater being forced to lower his titanic ego...and to kneel before the Boy-Who-Lived, the dear Champion of Albus Dumbledore himself. It might be a bet no one would take, but Alexandra was ready to bet that if Graham Montague didn't pull off something impressive for the Fourth Task, Voldemort was going to murder him before the Carnival officially ended. Just to stop him from becoming even more of an embarrassment than he already was for the Death Eater cause...

"You could look a lot more surprised, you know," Morag pouted.

"Morag. Unless Poliakov was feeling completely suicidal, it was a given that he was going to run to Malatesti and do everything in his power to fill the third Champion slot the 'Doge' had at his disposal. With Falk part of the Day Court, it's almost certain he would be assassinated in his sleep less than twenty-fours after the Fourth Task's grand opening. No, Montague was always going to end up with the Day Court, and Poliakov with the Doge's. A Junior Death Eater is insignificant for the Light, a Dark Champion isn't."

"I agree with the part where the Army of the Light would eliminate a Dark Champion brutally and quickly..." Morag began hesitantly. "But are you sure, Alex, that a Junior Death Eater is really insignificant in their eyes?"

"Well, when you put it like that...no." Alexandra grimaced before shrugging. "Oh, well. Not my problem."

"What happened to Hogwarts' unity, dear?"

"It got lost on the path of life." Lily Potter's daughter smirked. "And besides, this is going to work to our advantage. With Montague part of the Day hypocrites, they have a dead weight on their side, literally and metaphorically. The contest is suddenly far more balanced than the first rules suggested..."

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

"Nervous, oh Death?"

Alexandra raised an ironic eyebrow.

"Nervous? No, not really. What is there to be nervous for?"

The Champion of Ravenclaw was entirely truthful; it wasn't like they were going to participate in a Task or face some sort of extremely threatening event in the next minutes.

All they were going to hear today was the Judges giving them some of the rules applying for the Fourth Task.

"So no, I am not nervous, Chaos. I will freely admit I'm a bit impatient, though. It's been two hours since we entered this antechamber, and it's beginning to be boring."

"I agree," Ambre de Courtois played with her wand. "What is taking them so long?"

"They're likely going to make a spectacle out of it," Lucrezia Sforza said, inspecting her nails. "You know every student of the Scuola Regina wants to be invited to this Carnival, right?"

"Every student of Hogwarts wants to be invited too," Alexandra remarked.

"The same can be said for Durmstrang," Lyudmila admitted.

"Beauxbatons isn't the exception," Ambre nodded...prompting numerous chuckles from the six assembled Champions.

And yes, there were only six Champions in this antechamber, the five who had pledged themselves to the Night Court and herself. To avoid disputes and other violent events, the Champions had been separated into different rooms before the ceremony which was to take place today.

Yes, it was a...reasonable precaution.

"The Champions are invited to leave the room and answer the Judge's summons," a Tournament female official who had remained silent until now bowed to them and opened the sealed doors.

Alexandra breathed out theatrically and abandoned her large extravagant seat of brown and gold, and none of the other Champions were late in imitating the same; two hours spent waiting and waiting, again, was *very* boring.

The wait may be worth it, however.

That was Alexandra's first thought as they entered the hall where the Fourth Task's rules were going to be announced.

The room had been enchanted with thousands of magical butterflies and there were costumed dancers – likely students from the Scuola Regina – providing music and entertainment. There were, obviously, several thousands of people seated, and the enchanted mirrors suggested the images were sent to thousands more across Europe.

And there were three tables in the centre of this vast hall transformed into a giant musical show.

All tables faced the ten Judges, though there weren't seats per se for anyone, but gigantic couches, one for each Court, and they were all in a different but magically charmed colour.

The Night Court's couch, evidently, was a midnight black which seemed to soak up light like a black hole. The Day Court's colour was a radiant gold. And the Doge Court was the green-blue of the sea.

As they advanced in slow and measured steps, the repartition of the Champions was announced, just in case someone had been asleep for the last week.

The Doge Court was announced first: Romeo Malatesti as its King, then Fleur Delacour and Yegor Poliakov.

In second was the Day Court: Longbottom would lead it, and his Champions were Frode Falk, Cedric Diggory, Henri de Condé, Giovanni Ruspoli, Lucas Gauthier and Graham Montague.

Third and last – but not least – her Court was presented: she was the Queen, and Viktor Krum, Ambre de Courtois, Eleonora da Riva, Lucrezia Sforza, and Lyudmila Romanov were the Champions with her.

"Champions," three Judges took a step forwards; the seven others took a step back. Of the three which faced them with neutral expressions, it was the Transylvanian vampire who spoke. "I am Judge Grigore Sturdza. I will be the Head Judge for the Fourth Task."

The music stopped, and excited whispers were heard in the crowd.

"To our satisfaction, each King and Queen has respected the instructions which were given to him or her. All sixteen Champions are part of a Court. But," the shadow of a smile arrived to Grigore's lips, "the Courts are far from complete."

Many Champions, hearing that, showed carnivorous expressions. Malatesti was certainly the one who...smiled in the most disturbing fashion.

"Your Courts need your Warlocks, Artificers, and Guards. They will need to be recruited before the thirteenth of February at noon, twenty-four hours before the official beginning of the Venetian Carnival."

"Can we truly recruit everyone we want?" Henri de Condé asked politely after signalling his intention to question the former Quidditch player.

"Oh no, Champion de Condé, that would be way too easy." The vampire chuckled. "To be part of a Court, one absolutely needs to have celebrated his or her fourteenth birthday. The other non-negotiable requirement is to be a student among one of the four schools participating in this Tournament."

This, if anything, didn't decrease the enthusiasm of the public. Alexandra understood them; Grigore Sturdza had not said a word about it being limited to substitutes of the Champions. Perhaps sensing the euphoria needed to be stopped before it grew out of control, the Judge continued his explanation.

"Please make no mistake: joining a Court is extremely dangerous. We Judges want a great spectacle, a competition where subtlety and cunning will allow the Champions to expose their greatest talents while avoiding a pile of corpses. Yet I will say it high and clear so that there are no misunderstandings: if a student is part of a Court, they are a Champion in all but name and contract; he or she accepts the risks are the same for his or her life as they are for the sixteen Champions already confirmed to be participating."

In other words, they could definitely be killed if – or when – things turned ugly.

"Let's speak of the Champions first."

Four massive mirrors burned in crimson light, and then showed...numbers. At the same time, parchments appeared on their tables.

**Day Court: 7**

**Night Court: 6**

**Doge Court: 3**

"The Champions are the leaders of each court," the Chief Judge explained. "They, and only they, will be able to touch or participate in the challenges of the Aquamarine Keys. While they can't create heirlooms or magical substances like the Artificers will, they will be able to use the rewards of the other keys."

Oh by the Morrigan. It wasn't enough for them to find the Aquamarine Keys, there were other enchanted keys spread across Venice?

"The Champions will have a maximum of thirteen different costumes they are allowed to wear for the entire Carnival, not counting the clothing they will use for the two days of Truce."

Hmm...so the Fourth Task was not fifteen days long? That was good...wait a minute...fifteen minus two...thirteen...oh, curse the Exchequer.

"Their magical foci authorised for this Task are: their wand, a magical rapier which will be handed to them at the beginning of the Task, and one additional focus they will need to present to the Judges at least twenty-four hours before the Task."

Only one focus to decide upon...it was going to be quite a dilemma. Her Invisibility Cloak? It sounded like the most useful one, but with the crowds of the Carnival, it might cause a disaster if there was a riot at the worst moment...

"The Warlocks."

**Day Court: 20**

**Night Court: 10**

**Doge Court: 8**

Alexandra grimaced. Because of course, the Day Court had just received double the Warlocks she was authorised to recruit.

"Warlocks can't participate in challenges which will involve the Aquamarine Keys, nor can they touch the aforementioned Keys," Grigore Sturdza informed them, "but they can be involved in the other keys' trials and enigmas. The number of different costumes they are allowed to wear, however, is of only five, and one has to be common for all Warlocks. The Warlocks of the three Courts will be allowed one Wand and one enchanted Rapier, and they can't create any accessories or enchanted items."

If Alexandra understood correctly, the Warlocks were...capable auxiliaries the Champions would have to replace the Champions when they couldn't or didn't want to act. That made them extremely useful...and naturally, it was why the Night Court didn't have many.

Damn.

She was going to need an extensive and very careful selection process. The slightest mistake would be paid for harshly during the Fourth Task.

"I urge all students to carefully consider their choices..."

The words were wasted. Past the first warning of 'you can die at any moment like all Champions', the excitement of the spectators was rising once more.

And it was rising fast.

"Now let's speak of the Artificers."

**Day Court: 4**

**Night Court: 10**

**Doge Court: 4**

Well, that was a pleasant surprise. For once it was a domain where the Night Court had a massive advantage.

"Artificers are an extremely important part of each Court." The vampire cleared his throat for the theatrical effect of it; he certainly had no physical need to. "They will be the creators of Potions, enchanted objects, and other artefacts the Courts might employ. Due to their importance, they are the only members of the Court who can't be injured beyond light first blood cuts, and any enemy attacking them has no choice but to take them as his or her prisoners if they wish to neutralise them."

Artificers were thus the only ones without a death sentence hanging over their heads.

"To compensate for this advantage, the Artificers are only authorised their wands and the once-a-day cargo delivery of ingredients a Judge will oversee the transportation of. They can't touch or participate in any contest involving the keys, and they are only allowed two costumes, one of which has to be identical to all other Artificers of their Court."

Ah, too bad. But it unfortunately made sense. Otherwise, the Artificers, not the Champions, would be the Kings and Queens of the Task.

Bah, no matter. Alexandra was still going to recruit Fred and George as fast as possible.

"And finally, the Guards."

Alexandra braced herself...and had to control herself not to curse when the information was revealed.

**Day Court: 20**

**Night Court: 4**

**Doge Court: 50**

"That's a lot of Guards we won't have..." Viktor Krum whispered.

"The Guards' are much more restrained than the Warlocks," Grigore Sturdza was not trying to reassure the Night Court, right? "Like them, they can't participate in the creations of the Artificers, and their numbers of magical foci is limited to their wand and their rapier. The point they share with the latter is...they are only allowed two costumes, one which must be shared by their fellow Guards of their Court. As for the keys...at the beginning of the Task, each Guard will have to come forwards and choose one specific type of key he or she wants to obtain. For that type, the Guard will be able to participate in the challenges and the other activities proposed. The other types of keys and the challenges associated with them will be denied to him or her, however."

Alexandra had noticed it before, but this Task became more and more strategic as each rule was added.

Especially...well, the Night Court had almost no Guards at all. The Potter Heiress didn't know how many types of key existed or what kind of advantages they gave to the one who managed to obtain them, but she bet there were more than four types of keys in existence for this Task.

It wasn't good at all...not when the Doge Court would have a small army of them.

"And now for the fun part."

Oh, no, no, no...

"You have been told that the absolute rule is to preserve the Statute of Secrecy, and it is absolutely true."

Yes, she definitely didn't like where it was going...

"But we weren't going to be able to stop the non-magical population of Venice from being involved in this Carnival. Therefore, the 'Civil War' has been announced as a game which will be played out for the entire duration of the Carnival...we didn't mention the magical parts, of course."

Sauron and Saruman's dark souls...that was insane...and brilliant.

"You don't have permission to kill, injure, or cause any form of lasting damage to any spectator of the Carnival. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes..." The answer was given with...very clear degrees of reluctance.

"Obviously, the spectators and participants of the Carnival aren't authorised to interfere in any violent fashion either."

He didn't say, Alexandra noticed, that they weren't allowed to interfere at all. That translated into spying, intelligence gathering, and a whole lot of non-violent shenanigans being perfectly okay per the rules.

"One more rule: all Champions and their Court must be present in front of us when the Carnival begins. The location where we will be found will be the Plaza San Marco. Whether you come in costumes or not to the overture ceremony is your decision. Once the Carnival has officially started, the three Courts will be granted one hour of immunity during which they are utterly forbidden to look for each other, fight each other, or try any sort of inimical deed against an enemy Court. To prevent some temptations from our most...belligerent Champions," Malatesti grinned, knowing he was certainly among these hypothetical criminals, "the Courts will leave the heart of the city by different avenues."

They couldn't come in costume to the ceremony, that much was evident...and yet...it also might be a trap, because what would happen if they didn't wear a costume? Decisions, decisions...if they came wearing one of their costumes, said elaborate disguise might as well be burned afterwards...

"Any questions?"

Alexandra raised her hand.

"Yes, Champion Potter?"

"Are we limited to the two or three main islands that form Venice City itself for the Fourth Task?"

"Good question!" The vampire bared his teeth. "No, you aren't limited to them. The Judges graciously authorise every member of the three Courts to go and participate in the challenges of several famous and glamorous islands of Venice. But we will only reveal them by name the day the Fourth Task will begin...unless you discover the information contained in your Tournament Clue, of course."

And suddenly, if that hadn't been a priority – and it was, no doubt about it – it was at the top of her list to find the Clue...

"Last rule for today: the number of non-Court members participating in this Tournament will be limited."

The groan coming from the spectators was...extremely loud. And many students growled threateningly.

"It won't be limited for the two days of Truce," this time, the Chief Judge was *definitely* trying to reassure them before someone lynched him. "And those days include sumptuous balls."

There were still a lot of disappointed voices.

"A list of dignitaries had been written, and the beneficiaries will be informed before the end of the month. For the students...we have decided on a number, to be divided in three...and the boons will be delivered to the Kings of the Doge and Day Court, and the Queen of the Night Court."

Alexandra wasn't easily afraid. But watching the hungry gazes of thousands...yes, if you wondered, there was really something to be worried about...

**13 January 1995, Alexandra's villa, Coliseum Valley, Magical Republic of Venice**

"Well, we know how badly outnumbered we are going to be now."

"Yes, yes, we all heard the rules. No need to add your venom."

"You!"

Alexandra sighed. The second time she invited the Dark Queen and the Lust Succubus into her villa, and their antagonism resurfaced near immediately.

"Children, be nice."

Ambre de Courtois and Eleonora da Riva chuckled. Viktor Krum loudly cleared his throat.

"Yes, Mister the Quidditch super-star?"

"My fellow Champion of Durmstrang is blunt and undiplomatic, but she isn't wrong. We're severely outnumbered. It's going to be difficult to win this Task."

"Of course it is," Alexandra admitted without shame. "But I think we have plenty of factors we can take advantage of. One of the biggest, in my opinion, is that the two other Kings *know* that they have more Court members than us."

"Meaning we will be underestimated until we get our first noticeable successes?" the Champion of Innocence tried.

"Exactly."

"I...I don't exactly share your optimism, Champion Potter." Ambre de Courtois grimaced. "I mean, sure, they may underestimate us a bit, but it's a fifteen days-long Task."

"If you want to be accurate, thirteen," Lucrezia Sforza corrected with a smirk, "my dear."

"Fine," the Beauxbatons Champion huffed. "Thirteen days of challenge. Unless you tell me you have a plan to seize the thirteen Aquamarine Keys in less than twelve hours without a single Champion prisoner, it is far too probable that after the first defeats, they will regroup and strike in a more intelligent manner. And that's not even considering the possibility of the Day and the Doge Courts cooperating to destroy us before turning against each other."

"I thought about that worst-case scenario," Alexandra replied neutrally, "but it's extremely unlikely. The majority of the Day Court would not help Malatesti if he was burning alive, and the reverse is true."

With Falk spreading his poison to the ears of every 'Day Champion', the very thing which might have condemned the Night in a few days was not a real possibility anymore.

"I completely agree with our dear Queen."

Formidable, even the Succubus had jumped on that train of sarcasm and teasing...

"The 'Doge' won't cooperate, not with Falk as an advisor of the Day Court. He will wage war against Day and Night Court alike..."

"He has Delacour by his side," Ambre was still skeptical about their assurances.

"He has Poliakov too," Lyudmila reminded her. "And if I remember correctly, Poliakov hates Falk. Right, Krum?"

"Indeed," the Bulgarian Champion confirmed with a word and a nod.

"All right," the Champion she had defeated during the second duel of the Runic Tournament conceded after a long silence. "But the numbers are still against us."

"That's true." It would be futile to pretend the contrary, everyone around this table could count. "That's why I intend to select only the best of the best to be part of the Night Court. We can't beat our enemies in the quantitative domain. Quality is our only chance."

"I love how you think, my Queen," Lucrezia purred, "I can give you half a dozen of my cousins to serve as Warlocks and-"

"We aren't going to let you drown this Court with Succubae!" the Dark Queen interrupted with a growl, black sparks dancing around her fingers.

"That's not your decision to make," the Champion of Venus retorted peevishly. "This is the Queen's."

Alexandra sighed...it seemed she was doing that too much in the last forty-eight hours.

"Champion Sforza. While I don't doubt that your Succubae cousins are powerful magical practitioners in their own right...do they bring something to the table that you aren't able to provide?"

"Err...no."

Eleonora giggled, and Lucrezia gave her a half-serious glare.

"Though, they will be very knowledgeable about everything concerning Venetian culture and how to navigate in the little maze my beautiful city represents for anyone not familiar with it," the agent of the Exchequer promptly added.

"That's fair," Alexandra recognised before turning her head to have a global view of all the Champions sitting at the table. "All right. Here is what I intend to do. This is Friday evening. I want everyone around this table to go on a recruitment drive at your school. Then we meet again here on Sunday evening."

"I don't think it's that good an idea...*Alexandra*. The meeting at your villa, I mean."

"And why not...*Lucrezia*?"

She didn't ask the question for the sake of curiosity; as far as she knew, the place was protected by some measures the Exchequer's mages had built...

"Because it's easy to spy everyone who is coming to your villa and leaving it. Worse, if we do really intend to generate a lot of parchment-work and use a location as a headquarters, this villa is way too small."

"Be careful, Death," Lyudmila said, "she's going to propose her private quarters inside the Scuola Regina..."

"Don't be ridiculous, Chaos," the Succubus didn't stick her tongue out, but she wasn't far from it, "the Scuola Regina is out of the question. May I remind you that our enemies are studying here every day? No, I propose we use Ca'Sforza, the palace of my House in Venice City itself. I asked my mother, and she formally gave her word."

"You have permission for us to use a palace for all the duration of the Carnival?" Viktor Krum asked, his surprise obvious on his face.

Lucrezia shook her head.

"Not exactly, Krum. From tomorrow to two days before the Carnival, yes, we will have the opportunity to use the place how we want. After...we will still be able to use it, though my mother will be there with guests, and...well, the other Champions of the Doge and Day Court will be present in the city too, and will have the means to spy on everything we do inside the palace. And I don't have permission to turn my family palace into a fortress for the Fourth Task."

"A base of operations to prepare for the Fourth Task, but not something we can use on a day-to-day basis during it?" Ambre de Courtois voiced to sum-up the proposal.

"Yes."

"I accept!" All eyes turned towards Eleonora da Riva. "What?" The Champion of Innocence stared. "You haven't seen the sheer luxury and comfort of this palace, otherwise you would be in the process of prostrating yourself to thank her for the opportunity to live there for a month."

"Technically, we aren't going to live there..." Lyudmila Romanov snorted. "I mean, I would love to prepare for the Task with every hour of the day, however, while I don't know about the other Champions, I still have to attend some classes and self-study."

"We keep morning for the classes, and the afternoon is for the Task's preparations?" Viktor Krum proposed.

"That could work," Alexandra knew she could study a bit in the evening if the morning wasn't enough. "Okay, for the 'we use the Sforza Palace as our headquarters', who is against?"

No one raised his or her hand in protest...prompting a victorious smile from Lucrezia.

"Please don't grin too much, Lust. Motion voted. The headquarters of the Night Court will be the Ca'Sforza Palace, first session on Sunday afternoon. What is the next topic?"

"I want to ask if it is reasonable to make a recruitment drive at our schools," Ambre said. "I mean, I understand the principle, but we're going to be crumbling under the stacks of parchments from students begging us to participate. Whether they're above fourteen or not."

"I thought a bit about the problem," the Champion of Death told the female French witch, "and I think I have found a few solutions to...decrease the volunteer list. First and most obvious, if you try to apply to join the Night Court, you have to sign a regular official document that you swear you won't apply for any other Court."

The Dark Queen bared her teeth.

"That's a good one. We will get rid of those brats who wish to be part of a Court at any cost."

"But won't we make a few enemies by being too elitist?" Eleonora wondered.

"Maybe," Alexandra smiled. "But that's why I will receive two hundred spectator invitations from the Judges to deliver, no?"

"That would...soften a few ruffled feathers, yes."

"Second way to limit the selection process," the Ravenclaw Champion continued once the objections didn't manifest themselves, "I want every applicant to make his or her bid for a particular position in my Court. In other words, the witch or the wizard must write in an intelligible manner if they want to be a Warlock, Artificer, or a Guard, and why we should take her or him before their peers."

Viktor Krum burst in laughter.

"You're asking them to write an *essay*?"

"No," Alexandra tried not to chuckle herself. "More like three or four sentences like: 'this is what I know in magical lore and spells', and 'this is why you should take me'."

"Nonetheless," Eleonora told her, "I have a feeling that your selection process is indeed going to be...extremely professional...especially if we compare it to what the two 'Kings' will organise themselves."

"I completely agree with everything you said," Lucrezia Sforza murmured to the Light Champion.

"Anything else, your Majesty?"

Formidable, if even the Dark Queen was in the mood to tease her like that...

"Actually, yes. It's not important for the Artificers, but it's important we know if the Warlocks and Guards' potential recruits know how to wield a blade, given...well, given that one of our weapons is a rapier."

Alexandra gave the five other Champions an ironic smile.

"I know from painful experience Champion Romanov is deadly with a spear in her hands, and given her reflexes, a rapier shouldn't be too much trouble. I don't know how skilled the rest of you are."

"We are taught to duel with one-handed swords at Durmstrang," Viktor Krum answered. "I am...average."

"I won a few exhibition matches last year," Ambre de Courtois modestly said. "They were all wand-and-daggers duels, but a rapier should be fine."

"It is tradition among Venetian nobility to receive lessons in sword fighting," Lucrezia told her. "I have been fighting duels with a rapier for years."

"Never touched a blade in my life," Eleonora da Riva admitted.

This brought a...great amount of silence across the table.

"Never?"

"Never."

This wasn't good news...but it wasn't something that could be changed with a snap of their fingers.

"Fine...hopefully, the other Courts are in a far worse situation than we are on that front."

"Oh, they are," Viktor Krum reassured her. "Poliakov and Falk are absolutely awful."

"Really?" Ambre asked with curiosity. "How awful?"

"Yegor Poliakov almost cut his own hand once at Durmstrang. And Frode Falk was rapidly thrown out of the elective after the instructor had enough of his disrespectful behaviour..."

"Good," the female Beauxbatons Champion answered. "Because Delacour and De Condé are really skilled when they have a sword in hand."

This created quite a few grimaces and a moment of silence.

"That leaves the choice of what we will use as our third magical foci," Eleonora pointed out.

"I have one myself," Alexandra said carefully, "though the crowd of spectators is a problem, unfortunately."

"I don't want to break your hopes, *Alexandra*," the Champion of Lust said, "but if it results in problems when there are too many Carnival participants around, it's going to be next to useless until midnight. There are way too many people during a Carnival for it to be otherwise...and that's on 'ordinary years'. This year will be anything but normal."

"I know," the Invisibility Cloak of her family would be a deadly asset when mostly everyone had abandoned the streets, but before that...it would only be useful as long as it was a guarantee no one would trample her boots by mistake. Which wasn't likely at all. "But it isn't like first-rate heirlooms are picked at the first shop in the street."

"In the first shop, certainly not," the agent of the Exchequer grinned. "But I could loan you one..."

"In exchange for two Succubae becoming part of your Court, no doubt," the Dark Queen mused. "Ah, the joys of nepotism!"

"I don't want to hear it from the Heiress of one of the most corrupt Empires ever!"

"Repeat that, oh Lustful mess!"

Ah, the joys of dealing with two monstrously powerful witches who didn't like each other...

Alexandra sighed as the two older witches bickered.

Surely winning the Third Task didn't mean she deserved *that*?

**Author's note**: The first stage of the Courts' creation is complete. Next chapter, there will be selection processes, magic...and Alexandra and her friends will search for the Tournament Clue in the streets and on the canals of Venice.

And in the shadows, two immortal enemies prepare for a new battle of their millennia-old war...

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