**Chapter 92**

**Wounded Pride**

**4 December 1994, Infirmary Wing, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

When it came down to it, the Infirmary Wings of different schools may vary in size and bed styles, but they shared a lot of common points, so many that counting them would take most of a day. In one sentence, the wing was very white, very bland, the familiar aura of Cleaning Charms was everywhere, and the Nurses were polite but ruled their domain with an iron fist.

Alexandra was very glad a Hydra Animagus allowed her to heal in record time; the more she stayed away from those antechambers to proper hospitals, the better. Besides, if the rumour mill could be trusted – and it was generally accurate in those matters – food served here was really horrible-tasting compared to the elite cooking served by the kitchens of the Scuola Regina.

The Potter Heiress noticed the wards, however. That sort of thing wasn’t present at Hogwarts. They were definitely intent-based, and they were washing over skin every seven seconds or so. Most likely, they checked if she had no inimical plans for one of the infirmary’s patients.

A good thing she didn’t. On the other hand, why would a Tournament Champion bother killing anyone in the infirmary wing in the first place? This was what the Tasks were for if you had murderous thoughts...and if your target was a Champion, evidently.

Alexandra abandoned the thought, and knocked at the door the Venetian nurse had led her to. After the invitation had been given, the green-eyed Champion entered.

The healing room had a lot of visitors, in addition to Geoffrey Hooper.

Nearly all of them stopped speaking as they could see her.

“And here I thought I was popular...” the raven-haired fourth-year smirked and Cho returned it. But the Ravenclaw fifth-year was truly the only one to do so. “Bah! I bring gifts. Mainly chocolate and some flowers.”

And her flowers were far prettier than the numerous bouquets gathered on the left of the room. As for the chocolates, hers came from a famous chocolate-maker in the village nearby. They largely beat without trying the low-quality sweets of Britain that someone, no doubt the Gryffindors, had offered the ‘patient’.

“Do you think you’re funny, Potter?” Geoffrey Hooper glared at her.

“Those are very good chocolates,” Alexandra replied, all the while rolling her eyes.

“I could have died by your fault!” the soon-to-be ex-Gryffindor Champion snarled. “If you had given me all the information you had on the Second Task-“

“The result would have been exactly the same...at best.” Alexandra fought back a yawn; it would hardly be proper. Still, it was necessary to strangle in the cradle whatever stupidity the idiots of Gryffindor House had put inside his head. “At worse you would be dead.”

“You can’t know that. I could-“

“You could have done nothing. Romeo Malatesti is an enemy beyond you. I will be blunt, *Hooper*: if your opponent had taken you seriously, you would be dead.”

“But-“

“I don’t know whatever nonsense you’ve heard since you were evacuated out of the arena, but believe me: Romeo Malatesti was perfectly capable to kill you with one hand tied behind his back. You’re still alive because the Stymphalian Vulture chose to do the stupidest thing which crossed his mind, and cast a ritual which had a high chance of transforming the two of you in a river of blood and meat parts. That you aren’t dead today is the result of the organiser’s direct and indirect intervention, and a considerable dose of luck.”

“Of course you would say that,” Leo Black chose to open his mouth, lowering the intelligence in the room, “but I notice you preferred corrupting Bones all night rather than coming to present your apologies-“

“Corrupting Susan?” Alexandra chuckled. “I’m going to repeat it to her. She is so going to love it. We didn’t do much corruption last night...we just did a lot of...tender cuddling.”

They hadn’t gone all the way, but it had been a magical evening and night.

Cedric and Cho looked very amused by her words. The other students present...not so much.

“Leo is speaking before he has the time to think,” Geoffrey Hooper admitted, which was the cleverest thing he had said so far, “but he has a point: you are really late in presenting your apologies.”

“I’m sorry?” Alexandra raised an eyebrow. “Apologising for what?”

The face of the older Hogwarts student reddened, and the young witch knew that it was more than the defeat and the loss of his arm which had rankled the Gryffindor; it was his pride which had been trampled.

“I lost my arm, Potter!”

“Yes. And if you hadn’t been immediately given to the care of the Scuola Regina’s Healers, you would likely be dead. The fangs of the monstrosity Malatesti transformed the Hetkoshu Crocodile into were born of Dark Magic itself. I’m quite unsure if Professor Snape and Professor Dumbledore working together would have been able to do more than to delay for a few months your death.”

The Ravenclaw Champion sighed.

“And frankly, you seem to forget I managed to decipher the Tournament Clue very late in the month. It was quite difficult, you know-“

“That’s because we weren’t supposed to decipher it the hard way,” Cedric said sarcastically. “After you left, one of the Judges revealed the solution to the two clues was waiting in their Coliseum’s lodge for the first fifteen days after the First Task. That’s how the Succubus solved the enigmas, by the way.”

Alexandra closed her eyes and grimaced. Suddenly, she really felt like an idiot. Naturally, there had been a shortcut they were supposed to use...and she hadn’t even investigated the arena and the stands nearby, despite seeing it more than ten times per day.

Meagre consolation, she hadn’t been the only one to dismiss it out of hand.

Damn. The Slayer of two Basilisks wasn’t often feeling completely outmatched and outmanoeuvred, but it was certainly...err...a sobering reminder to be humble.

“Interesting,” the Potter Heiress acknowledged at last. “I suppose several Champions already tried to enter the Coliseum this morning to see if there were some Clues waiting there?”

“They did,” Cho informed her. “That’s when they discovered the Coliseum is closed until the last Task to the public and the Champions.”

Ron Weasley glared at her like she was at fault, but Alexandra ignored him with the ease of long practise.

Personally, the Champion of the Morrigan was unsurprised. The Judges were many things, but they had proven they weren’t imbeciles. And unless they decided to lower the difficulty level to first-year, only a moron would repeat the same trick twice.

“That’s all very interesting,” Geoffrey Hooper spoke bitterly, “but you could still have helped us more than you did!”

Truly only a Gryffindor would have the self-righteousness to speak in a tone perfectly filled with toxic naivety, senseless courage, and a good dose of hypocrisy on top of the cake.

“True,” the Ravenclaw witch confessed. “I *could* have done more. But why *should* I have?”

Geoffrey Hooper may be one of the ‘salvageable’ Gryffindors – he didn’t look like it today, but this was a very bad day for him. For now however, he had not proven he was ready to make the right choices. The moment Hooper had seen the crocodilian abomination emerge from the darkness, the smart thing to do would have been to forfeit and run away.

“I am a Hogwarts Champion.”

That was one of the most naive and lame things she had not expected to hear.

“And? You realise Montague is a Hogwarts Champion too, I suppose.”

“That’s different!” Because obviously Leo Black could not stop opening his mouth, even if his life was at stake...and everyone knew it. “He is a Junior Death Eater! This damn snake has no right-”

“He is a Champion...” Alexandra declared, rolling her eyes before showing a satisfied smile. “Yes, he was utterly ridiculous during the Second Task, but it isn’t a disqualification factor. Losing one’s arm however, is.”

“Sometimes I wonder who’s side you’re siding with, *Potter*.”

Alexandra gave a glance at the immobilised Gryffindor Champion on the infirmary bed before going to study the mass of ‘gifts’ which had arrived between last afternoon and this morning.

“I am loyal to myself, *Hooper*. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“You need to pay for the healing procedure!”

For once, the content blurted out by Fred and George’s little brother was not something to be disregarded in a couple of seconds.

“I thought the healing was provided if a Champion was wounded during one Task.” The rules had certainly said so, and Fleur Delacour’s treatment, to name only a single example, had proved the Healers of the Scuola Regina were taking their responsibilities very seriously. “And some advertisement before coming here was boasting about limb regeneration. I’m sure it isn’t instantaneous,” the contrary would be very surprising, unless they manage to manipulate human bodies to include Hydra regeneration, “but I don’t think they would deny treatment to someone just because he or she is British.”

“It isn’t because I am British,” Geoffrey Hooper grunted after several seconds, “the Healers who came this morning said there is something which is interfering with the...rituals and Potions they use to prepare someone to grow back a new limb. Malatesti did serious Black Magic. He should be dragged to Azkaban for what he did!”

Alexandra continued to stare, unimpressed by the outburst. What point of ‘diplomatic immunity’ and ‘the Judges’ rules are the only rules’ had the Gryffindor failed to see when they signed the parchments months ago?

The Champion of Ares had been moronic to unleash a tiny amount of the power of Sobek, Egyptian God of Crocodiles, inside the arena, but it was not forbidden.

“They are willing to try experimental stuff if I can gather the Galleons for it. Otherwise they will give me a prosthesis like the one they gave Mad Eye Moody.”

“I doubt it will be ‘like the one’ this ex-Auror has. The Venetian medicine practitioners have access to far better artificial replacement parts than the British ones have.”

It was something the ‘poor’ Gryffindor should be thankful of, because the prostheses of Moody looked *hideous*.

“You are really a cold bitch, aren’t you, Potter? Do you want Hooper to beg you for fifty thousand Galleons so he can have a new arm?”

Alexandra suddenly found the Healers of the Scuola Venetia had a point about their intention-based wards.

You could arrive in the infirmary wing with a smile on your face, and suddenly feel the intent to kill gain dominance in your head.

“Black. Three points. First, if you continue to insult me, I am really going to make sure that you won’t live to see the year 1995. Secondly, I am not a Seer, and I don’t have any skill in Legilimency. That means that unless someone tells me in a language I understand what he wants from me, I am not going to be able to deduce it from non-existent information. And finally, if you want my help or my gold, it is far better to not insult me. It also helps to be a friend, not a leech or a gold-digger opportunist. So far, I can say quite safely none of the Gryffindors in this room are worth spending one Galleon upon. Now I have far better things to do than listening to your accusations and whining. Have a nice day...or not. I don’t particularly care.”

**4 December 1994, Diagon Alley, London**

If he had any choice in the matter, Rufus would not be here today, in this upper-class restaurant of Diagon Alley.

It was an untraditional place serving Italian food and absolutely none of the English beverages he enjoyed drinking. And it was partially owned by a woman who should be locked up in an Azkaban cell, not playing politics in the Wizengamot or enjoying foreign cooking.

Alas, he hadn’t any choice in the matter. No one had ever come forwards to reveal to the Aurors of his department how Stella Zabini killed her husbands one after another; and Rufus had to assume no one ever would, given how long she had been successfully doing it.

It wasn’t easy to admit. Especially not when today, their ‘meeting’ was constantly interrupted by wizards and witches coming to compliment the Lady of House Zabini for the excellent performance of her ‘protégée’.

If anything, with the magical memories of the Tasks of the European Magical Tournament being duplicated by the thousands and sold for affordable sums of Sickles, Stella Zabini was more or less untouchable.

“You seem to displeased, Director Scrimgeour?”

Thanks Merlin’s beard he knew Occlumency. Otherwise he would have spluttered and lost a lot of his composure each time the Black Widow tried to show off how tight and revealing her red dress was. And no, she didn’t wear anything under it.

“Your...your *protégée* is giving a lot of people in the British Isles the idea that Dark Magic is *acceptable*.”

“I fail to see how,” the dark-skinned witch answered with a charming smile.

“The *Dragon of Lindworm* is a Dark Magic illegal Runic Galdr and has been treated as such since 1950.”

The look he received in return was totally unimpressed.

“It’s not my fault,” Stella Zabini told him, “that you’re so afraid of your own shadows that when an incantation is too powerful for your mediocre politicians, you consider it a duty to ban it and label it ‘Dark Magic’. The *Dragon of Lindworm* is powerful, yes. But it does not require blood sacrifice, any esoteric ingredients, or forbidden sacrifices to activate...though I was pleasantly surprised my protégée managed to cast it alone. Usually, the battle-wizards of the eighteenth century were between two and four when they unleashed it.”

And that summed-up the big problem Britain had on its hands, no? The First Task could have been a hoax or something unique, but for a fourteen-year-old girl to prove that powerful was giving many Dark Houses unpleasant ideas. And many of those numbers had not supported You-Know-Who or had broken completely with the Death Eaters’ movement since his defeat thirteen years ago.

“And the Egyptian Curse she used during her second Duel? Are you going to pretend it is not Dark Magic either?”

“Dark Magic here, Dark Magic there,” the woman who had murdered all her husbands whimsically replied. “Are you not a bit tired, Director, to repeat the same thing over and over? You know most of Europe find your rules absolutely tedious and hypocritical, right? Even the French, who have a lot of Light incantations as part of their founding myths, are not forbidding so many spells in the name of Ministry control.”

“This is not-“

“And honestly,” the Black Widow continued, “this Tournament rules were clear from the start: except a few particularly horrible curses and rituals, nothing would be forbidden when the Champions compete. What happens inside the arena stays in the arena. Outside the competition, the laws of the host country apply; inside it, the participants can do as they wish in the name of victory. Dumbledore and the Ministry signed many treaties supporting this stance over one year ago. This is nothing new.”

“True. But I can tell you it is getting more and more difficult to persuade Minister Fudge from not intervening. Yesterday I had to spend two hours convincing him not to order the arrest of your protégée.”

Two hours wasted, and he was sure he would have to waste more next week.

“I’m glad you did,” Stella Zabini told him in a rather sincere tone. “I would rather avoid the ICW and most of its member states hammering economically and military Britain. While I’m doing most of my shopping elsewhere, I have invested a lot in this country. It would be absolutely disappointing to lose decades of effort because the idiot-in-charge is unable to respect his signature and his non-magical oaths.”

“This is all you are concerned about? Losing your investments?”

It had been intended as sarcasm, but the Black Widow genuinely seem to consider the question seriously.

“Well...” the witch wearing the indecent red robe paused, “I suppose I should be more concerned about hiring several wizards to clean up the mess afterwards.”

“The mess?” Rufus repeated coldly.

“The mortal remains of our dear Minister after a certain Champion would have finished dealing with him.” The murderess clarified her previous sentence.

Rufus wanted to retort that his Aurors and the rest of the DMLE personnel would protect the Minister and stop any death duel on the Wizengamot floor. The problem with this thought was that a great number of Aurors were more loyal to their former boss, namely Amelia Bones, than him, and those who obeyed his orders without question were not the ones most renowned for their principles.

If Alexandra Potter entered the Wizengamot chambers with the intention of removing Fudge from his position, many would stand aside. The Minister had not been very popular at the height of his power, but compared to the abysses of unpopularity he was ‘enjoying’ those days...

“I would prefer to avoid this kind of situation.”

You-Know-Who had been bad, but at least the Dark Lord had never been so confident in his reign of terror to walk inside the Ministry and ask for the keys of the building. And with the Wizengamot in turmoil, a true era of chaos may begin after that.

“I would like to avoid it too, Director...”

**4 December 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

The Scuola Regina’s lunch hall had not the starry representation of the sky Hogwarts’ Great Hall had. On the other hand, the Venetian wizards in charge of the decoration had other very impressive and beautiful things. Today, the paintings and the mirrors had been suddenly transformed to suit a white winter style, with firs covered in enchanted snow, and the majority of the walls and the artistry now presenting a shining silvery shade supported by vibrant gold and green items.

The change of ambiance was rather welcome, as even with weather control, the local wizards and witches had allowed the first snowfall of the day to happen outside this morning.

Alexandra, like nearly all other Champions, had been too busy deciphering the Clue and working upon her strategy for the Second Task, but now it was impossible to not think about the upcoming end-of-the-year festivities.

Well, it was impossible to not think about that when she wasn’t kissing Susan and eating a lot of pasta.

Okay, the latter was over for a good ten minutes, but the former was definitely not. And the Potter Heiress was about to leave her chair so that this pleasurable activity – and more – was continued in a far less public location when the voice of one of the Judges resonated loud and clear.

“Champions and non-Champions, may I have your attention, please?”

Alexandra turned her heads towards the Judges’ table – which had no doubt been placed conveniently in the centre today just for this very speech.

The Judge standing was not the Rune-Mistress who had been overseeing the Second Task yesterday...what was her name again? Ah yes, Enikö Varga.

It wasn’t the Beast-Tamer Mohammed ben Qassim and his very original beige-orange robes either.

No, it was one of the male Judges...it was certainly the Australian one, given his weird accent.

“For those who don’t know me, I am Judge Felix Norris, representative of the Ministry of Magical Australia for the European Magical Tournament.”

Alexandra frowned. The name she had heard somewhere, and wasn’t it interesting the foreign wizard had not revealed the field of magic he was specialised into?

“First, the bad and the good news about the Champions themselves. In accord with the Headmasters and the Headmistresses, we agreed the grievous wound suffered by Champion Geoffrey Hooper makes it impossible for him to continue to participate as Hogwarts Champion for the time being. The same decision has been taken, for obvious reasons, where the tragically departed Champion Karl Schumacher is concerned.”

If fewer than five hundred pairs of eyes turned towards the table where a certain Dark Queen smiled carnivorously, the Basilisk Slayer would be shocked.

“To replace them during the Third Task, we are pleased to announce Champion Neville Longbottom and Champion Frode Falk have not hesitated a single second joining the great contest of the European Magical Tournament! They will challenge the fourteen other Champions during the Third Task!”

There was some enthusiastic applause coming from every table. Alexandra clapped her hands, but slowly and with no smile whatsoever.

Neville had been expected. He was the first substitute of Hooper, after all – even if Alexandra’s humble opinion, Angelina Johnson would be a far better Champion than Fate’s Chosen would ever be.

But a second Light Champion entering the fray at the same time he did? No, she hadn’t expected that.

It wasn’t a coincidence. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

Another Judge stood. It was the old-looking Japanese Judge...Hanayo Komachi.

“We will need all the Champions to approach the table for the next part.”

The reason why became evident a second later, as their Tournament Clues and a lot of curious books were summoned from somewhere, on a table of black ebony colour.

As the sixteen Champions formed a line before the two Judges, the Ravenclaw Champion could see those were indeed books. They had a very ‘medieval theme’ – similar to a majority of the Hogwarts Library, really – with a single exception: the size. Indeed, given the absolutely tiny thickness of those books, it didn’t seem possible for them to contain more than a few pages.

“We won’t keep the mystery any longer: those books are indeed your Clues for the Third Task.”

“Wonderful,” she heard Lyudmila Romanov mutter, “that promises to be as much as a chore as the one for the Second Task.”

The Potter Heiress wasn’t about to disagree with her. Appearances were not everything whenever magic was involved, but a book with nothing between the covers...well, it screamed ‘enigma’...again.

“There is however a massive difference between these books and the papyrus you obtained at the end of the First Task,” the old Japanese wizard watched them with an expression of...serenity? It was difficult to guess, seriously, given how wrinkled his face was. “As the Champions who received the papyrus know very well today, you had to solve two Hieroglyph enigmas for the true Clue to be revealed. For this Clue, this won’t be the case. The books you will be given are divided into four parts. Each of them is of very variable length and importance. With each globe you were able to obtain during yesterday’s runic duels, one of the book’s sections will be unsealed today. If you have not obtained them...you will need to find out how to unlock them by yourself.”

“And how-“ Viktor Krum began, before the Champion’s Tournament Clues began to be shrouded in magical auras.

The golden cup that was her ‘Clue’, for example, burned in green fire, before a torrent of what could be best described as liquid lightning burst from the artefact and struck the book.

Suddenly, instead of having a book with nothing but the covers, her Tournament Clue had the thickness of a more respectable book of approximately one hundred pages.

Looking on her right and left, unfortunately, it was evident her performance in this regard during the Second Task had placed her behind the Dark Queen and Lucrezia Sforza: their books looked like they had a hundred additional pages compared to hers.

It could be worse. Graham Montague, Eleonora da Riva, Henri de Condé, Boris Viipuri, Armand Coularé, Frode Falk, and of course a very disgruntled Romeo Malatesti; all of those Champions had seen their Clue activated...and nothing whatsoever happened to increase the size of their ‘book-clue’.

“If you want more information about the Third Task, you will have to search for it...and stay with your eyes wide open for a grand event which has proven an extremely popular event for centuries.”

Whispers began to come from every part of the hall, and the wrinkled face of the Japanese Judge for the first time tried an expression which could be recognised as a smile.

“The Winter Ball, one of the most cherished traditions of interschool tournaments, will indeed be hosted by the Scuola Regina this month. I will remind the Champions they will open the Ball, and as such a partner for the prestigious ceremonies and the first dance is mandatory.”

It had been whispers before. Now it was excited cheering and acclamations which rose from...well, pretty much everywhere.

In an instant, the fragile calm was utterly broken, and everyone began to try to speak louder than his or her neighbour.

What made Alexandra feel afraid for the first time of the day wasn’t the ruckus, however.

It was the way a lot of students were outright leering in their direction. Forget that, in her direction.

Most expressions after the Second Task had been divided between impressed, in awe, or slightly afraid, but here there was no confusion possible: the Potter Heiress was evaluated like one does inspect a piece of meat.

It was...okay, it wasn’t a battle she was strong enough to win.

Alexandra seized her book-clue, and ran back to her table.

A second later, she was bending the knee in front of Susan.

“Lovely Susan...would do me the immense honour of being my date for the Winter Ball?”

Morag, treacherous friend that she was, burst in laughter immediately.

Fortunately, the answer was not long in coming, and it was accompanied with a kiss on her forehead.

“Yes.”

**5 December 1994, Cedric’s Villa, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

One day ago, Neville had thought the worst thing that could happen was to become the Gryffindor Champion.

Now that he was the representative of the House of Godric Gryffindor in the deadly Tournament, the young Champion of Fate had changed his mind. The worst thing that could happen to him was...it was...oh by Merlin’s beard.

He had to find a partner for the Ball which was going to happen in front of a large percentage of the entire European Wizarding population a few days away.

He had to ask a girl, and pray she answered by a ‘yes’, otherwise he would have to do it again.

Seriously, if the Judges were fair, it would count as a Task by itself, no?

Neville wanted to believe the other Champions of Hogwarts shared the same problem, but...they did not.

Everyone who wasn’t blind and dead had heard Alexandra Potter ask Susan Bones, and though Cedric’s demand to Cho Chang had been slower and likely more intimate, since they hadn’t done it in public, by the time they arrived at yesterday’s dinner, it had been a done-deal.

Three of the prettiest British girls were already unavailable...and the dangerous predators – led by a small army of Succubi and some Hogwarts purebloods who had somehow found the Portkeys to be invited this week-end in Venetia – were circling around.

And Neville had to find a girl he would dance and share the evening with.

It wouldn’t be his first dance; as the Boy-Who-Lived, his grandmother and himself had gone to a few Ministry and Noble Houses’ Yule Balls beginning the year before his first year. And he had danced with children of his age.

But it wasn’t the same thing. In Britain, there had never been more than one hundred wizard and witches attending.

If the rumours of entire wings of the Scuola Regina being closed as decorations and other preparations were ongoing were true...it would make the British Balls absolutely insignificant in comparison.

Why by Godric’s sword didn’t it count as a Task? It certainly was difficult enough to be one!

Neville shivered, and it wasn’t because outside the villa the weather was absolutely freezing.

“Yes, in a way we are victims of our success,” Cedric admitted, and Neville tried to concentrate on the present and forget – temporarily – the next monumental challenge he had to tackle. “We are two Champions of our schools to have received two Clues; unfortunately, they are the same. The Judges didn’t trick us when they mentioned each clue received when one completed the obstacle course of the Egyptian Temple would be identical.”

“Let’s see the positive side,” the Ravenclaw Champion said, one of her emerald rings on her fingers burning in the same green magic as the gemstones around her neck. The most dangerous Hogwarts Champion had taken a page from the Black Widow today in fashion...likely to impress Susan Bones who was behind her seat. “We’re in a far better position than most of the Champions. Many wizards extremely dangerous, Romeo Malatesti comes to mind, have failed to secure a single clue.”

Neville grimaced. Leo, Ron, and all the Hufflepuffs did the same.

After the Dark Champion of War had done...after he summoned this monster by calling an Aspect of the Dark, the Boy-Who-Lived really, really didn’t want to fight this maniac alone.

Transforming the Hetkoshu Crocodile into something terrifying and unnaturally Dark was abominable in addition to being nearly suicidal. But the Ares psychopath had done it.

Now the dreadful question had to be asked: what else was he ready to unleash, given the chance?

Neville didn’t know the answer...but he had a feeling he was going to discover it soon.

“Okay...” He cleared his throat and the Champions and the substitutes’ eyes focused upon him. “But having the first clue is not a significant advantage. I mean, it gives the date of the Third Task and the location, but I don’t think any Champion will be left in the dark before it begins.”

“Absolutely not!” Graham Montague grinned. “I already know it is happening at midnight on the fifth of January. And it is taking place in this northern valley near the border with the Swiss preserve!”

Cedric Diggory face-palmed, and by the way Death’s Dark Champion sighed and stared at the table, the temptation had to be there to slam her head against it.

“No, Montague,” the Ravenclaw girl said, giving the Slytherin an expression which could be best translated as ‘I can’t believe you are that stupid’. “The Third Task will begin on the sixth of January, at the same hour we began the Second Task. And it is taking place inside the Coliseum, like the two previous Tasks. You should check with someone having the Clues before swallowing the first stupidity that comes your way.”

“Err...yes.” Neville approved. “Aside from that, the first clue gives relatively little information. On dozens of pages, we have a long list about everything we are not allowed to bring into the arena...which includes apparently most of the Runic-based foci Champions had the right to use in the Second Task.”

The longer this Tournament lasted, the less the new Gryffindor Champion liked the humour of the Judges.

“This is a long list,” it ran on nearly fifty pages, so it was a nice understatement, “but it doesn’t tell what this Task is about. It just tells what it’s not going to be about, mostly Ancient Runes and secondary foci. The date and the location are the most useful news. That and the fact the sixteen Champions will compete together.”

“That’s singularly unhelpful,” Cedric Diggory agreed, before looking at the fourth-year Ravenclaw who had survived a sword fight with the Dark Queen. “You see no problem telling them?”

“Before the Second Task,” the green-eyed Ravenclaw witch commented, “my main reason not to reveal everything was the potential danger revealing too much to opponents I could face within minutes in the arena. Given the...lamentable performance of certain parties, I realise a lot of my fears were unfounded.”

Cool, they had at last received an apology from the Champion of Death...wait a minute...had she hinted they couldn’t represent a threat to her?

“Go ahead, oh fair Champion of Hufflepuff,” Alexandra Potter smirked. “Tell them what we know. That way there will be no accusations of withholding vital information this time. We will share all the clues we have...which is far from a complete picture.”

“You have described rather impressively our situation,” the favourite of the Badger House smiled before nodding to Montague and him. “Let’s begin, then. The Third Task is going to be called ‘the Assault of the Citadel’. As far as we can tell, it has a medieval theme, like the Second Task had an Egyptian one. And...okay, there are no easy way to tell you the news. It is going to be about Potions.”

Neville Longbottom and all the Gryffindors present in the villa groaned extremely loudly.

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“It is going to be about Potions.”

Despite knowing what was coming, it was hard not to giggle.

Morag, of course, had no such reluctance, and went so far as to take a photo of the horrified expressions of the Lions.

“Tell me you’re joking,” the Boy-Who-Lived didn’t beg, but he was half-way there. Yes, suddenly failing to pay attention to Snape’s instructions wasn’t so funny anymore, was it?

“No, no we’re not,” the Hufflepuff Champion, in all fairness, looked rather sympathetic when considering their Gryffindor counterpart’s problem.

“There is a lot we still don’t know, but the Third Task is going to be about Potions, and using them to disarm or bypass the defences of the ‘Citadel’.”

“That sucks,” Angelina Johnson commented and no one came forwards to say she was wrong. Well, no one but-

“For you, maybe.” Graham Montague sneered. “I, as Champion of House Slytherin, will have no issue-“

“The ingredients for the Potions we will have to brew are mostly about Alchemical reagents.” Cedric continued, and this time it was the turn of the Junior Death Eater’s face to groan in despair, and the Gryffindors laughed at his reaction...before remembering they were in the same sinking boat.

“That’s...those are NEWTs-level Potions,” Montague said weakly.

“Yes,” Cho’s boyfriend agreed, “and our Potions Professor at Hogwarts don’t train anyone below seventh-year to brew them.”

“Admittedly,” the Chinese-looking substitute amended, “the Potions are not that difficult. It’s more the difficulty of acquiring enough Alchemical reagents for a tutoring course. We have an Alchemist as Headmaster, but apparently he has better things to do than fill up the stocks of the Potions classrooms.”

“I won’t let you insult Professor Dumbledore!” Leo Black barked. “You wouldn’t have the courage to accuse him if he was there!”

Alexandra rolled her eyes. Of course Cho Chang wouldn’t. Accusing someone like Dumbledore when he was present was utterly counterproductive; no matter how he reacted, the issue wouldn’t be solved.

“Then I suppose you have been trained in the brewing of Potions which involve Alchemical reagents?” the Ravenclaw Champion inquired. The Gryffindor boy sent her a murderous glare, but didn’t answer. “I’m rather sure I wasn’t, personally.”

Horace Slughorn was very complimentary about her dedication in the field of Potions, but the green-eyed witch had not progressed so far that learning specialised NEWTs-level Potions was on tomorrow’s lesson.

“Do we know at least which kind of Potions will be necessary to succeed?” asked Tamsin Applebee.

“No,” Cedric was quick to shake his head. “We know there are four ‘brewing phases’ and four ‘challenge phases’. But we don’t have the time limits for each phase, the reagents authorised...Merlin’s beard, we don’t even know if the reagents will be delivered by the Tournament’s organisers or we will have to secure our own.”

“It will be the Tournament which will hand them,” Alexandra said neutrally. “It was not mentioned in the clue, but Alchemical reagents are worth their weight in Galleons, and sometimes more. So far, the Judges have been very impartial: a Champion coming from a low-income family had theoretically as much chance to win as someone from a prestigious House. Demanding everyone grab somehow Alchemical reagents would be absolutely contrary to their previous stance.”

“But you can’t be certain.” Angelina Johnson had a worried expression, which was understandable, given how disastrous the Second Task had been for Hogwarts as a whole.

“No,” the Champion of the Morrigan admitted, “to be sure, I would have to read the two other clues I wasn’t able to seize.”

“It’s true the last pages which are supposed to allow us to unlock the other pages are complete gibberish,” Cadwallader intervened.

“Not gibberish,” Roger Davies corrected. “It is a code involving the international classification of Potion ingredients.”

“Not Arithmancy?” Blaise asked, his curiosity evidently piqued.

“I am far better at Arithmancy than I will ever be in Runes,” her first substitute spoke with non-hidden pride, “and I can tell you that with so many non-prime numbers, the matrixes of Arithmancy would be indeed gibberish. No, the Task is about Potions; the enigmas which are handed out if we want more information are about Potion and the only thing with numerical codification approaching the parameters is the international classification of ingredients.”

“We’re at a severe disadvantage, then,” Neville Longbottom glumly said.

“What could possibly make you say that?” Alexandra asked sarcastically. “We haven’t the first clue of what Potions to brew, the obstacles we will have to face during the Task save that they will be vaguely medieval-themed, or how the Judges intend to make sixteen Champions compete together without it immediately unravelling into a bloodbath.”

“Arguably,” Cho Chang said cautiously, “the last part is not entirely true...at least for the brewing phases. If the Judges and the arena-handlers are intelligent, they will forbid any kind of violent interaction between Champions during them.”

“That makes sense,” the Ravenclaw Champion acknowledged after a few seconds to examine the idea. “Good point, Cho.”

“Unfortunately,” Angelina Johnson pointed out, “while all Hogwarts Champions will likely be safe from the rest of the competition, it doesn’t mean it will be safe to be near a cauldron either. Does someone remember how much the Potions Preliminary at Hogwarts sucked?”

Sonorous groans echoed in support. And yes, yes they did.

“This time it will be different!” Graham Montague exclaimed.

“Yeah,” the athletic girl snarked. “This time, no one will have ever brewed a Potion of that level before entering the arena. I’m sure it’s going to go *extremely well*.”

**6 December 1994, Art Wing, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

Today was her first official lesson of painting. It had gone as well as one could imagine.

“I’m going to call it *Ten Shades of Red Sun*.” Alexandra told Susan once a bell tolled some distance away and the lessons ended for today.

“Well...” the red-haired Hufflepuff smirked, “I am ready to grant you there’s a lot of red. But a sun? Are you sure I’m looking at the correct canvas?”

“It’s modern art, your British barbarian!” Alexandra theatrically gasped in horror.

“Alex...you dislike the modern art of the non-magical culture...not that I blame you, but-“

“Don’t try to dig new holes in my arguments, please,” Alexandra stuck her tongue out.

“On the plus side, you managed to pour more red paint on the canvas than on any other object. That’s definitely progress.”

“I don’t know if you remember, but I’m not the one who had a clay mask by the end of the pottery lesson.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Alex,” the Bones Heiress declared innocently.”

“Of course you don’t,” the Basilisk Slayer snorted before a familiar perfume was caught on by her overdeveloped sense of smell. Alexandra didn’t turn her head to verify, not when the noise of the footsteps confirmed the presence of the other Dark Champion. “Per chance, has a Succubus entered the wing?”

“Yes, she did.” Susan nodded. “And if she tries to kiss what is mine, I’m throwing her to the Hetkoshu crocodiles.”

“I’m not sure XXXX-class monsters...no, let’s correct that: XXXX-class monsters are definitely insufficient to deal with another true Champion. The Hetkoshu were only able to delay me, why would they be able to do more in her case?”

“An army of Inferi?

“I’m sure she can cast a few fire spells...”

Naturally, the time they took to exchange those sentences was sufficient for the Champion of Lust to walk up the currently near-empty painting classroom.

“But is the Champion of the Scuola Regina herself!” Alexandra cheerfully spoke like she had just discovered her presence a second ago. “And she went so far as to not come naked today! Extraordinary! What can we do for the Great and Lustful House of Sforza today?”

“I’ve come to apologise,” Lucrezia Sforza levitated a seat and positioned it so that when she used it, she could face both Susan and she. “For the kiss.”

“There was no offence taken.” Alexandra said truthfully. “I should have known far better than to let you touch me in the middle of a competition.”

“But I took offense,” Susan growled.

“In my defence, I wanted only to destabilise her...” the currently blonde-haired Dark Champion saw immediately that it was not going to be ‘acceptable’ for her girlfriend, and changed her tune. “I won’t do it again. And I apologise.”

“Apologies accepted.” The Bones Heiress replied with ill-grace. There was a long moment of hesitation and then...

“For the sake of curiosity, will I really look like this in a few years?”

And just like that, most of Alexandra’s concentration was utterly broken, and images she had done her best to ignore since the Second Task came back like a furious torrent. Alexandra couldn’t help it, she blushed...a lot.

“I can’t promise I did it perfectly, but yes, you are likely to be as beautiful if you take care of your body,” Lucrezia Sforza purred dangerously. “If you desire it, I can do the same for your girlfriend...give you a taste of what Champion Potter will look like when the magnificent Cygnus will have taken flight...”

“Maybe in a few weeks...” Susan answered, and Alexandra sent her a betrayed expression. “What? You and most of the stadium had minutes to watch at my not-yet-body.”

“I was more worried about winning the duel, thank you very much.” The Potter Heiress sniffed.

“Which is why you’re still my girlfriend.” The nice of Amelia Bones could be very terrifying and pretty at the same time when she was like this...ahem.

“Fine,” Alexandra huffed, before staring at the amused Succubus, who with her looks and certainly not-approved uniform could have taken the pose for uncountable advertisement campaigns in the magical and non-magical world. “You’ve made your point. Incidentally, Champion Sforza and I have more...awful subjects of discussion to exchange upon.”

“I suppose you’re not speaking of the headlines of your British newspaper proclaiming ‘Montague: A Bridge too far!’ that I read this morning.”

The Ravenclaw Champion gave the daughter of the Succubus Headmistress points for her attempts at levity. She removed them instantly because there was nothing funny about the second cataclysm the Exchequer had unleashed on the world.

“Yes, my superiors were responsible. It was necessary to destroy one of the most heavily defended fortresses of the Army of Light.”

“Necessary,” Alexandra murmured. “You killed tens of thousands of men, women, and children whose only crime was to live near the Indian Ocean. By the dark breath of several hundred Dark Lords, the only reason the Statute of Secrecy isn’t irredeemably broken is because no one, including thousands of wizards and witches, will think someone magical is capable of gathering enough power to unleash destruction on such a scale.”

What they had done to Brise-Roc was an amusing child play by comparison. The south-east of the Asian continent and the Indonesian archipelago were going to take decades and monumental governmental effort to even begin assessing the magnitude of the carnage and then begin the long process of recovery.

“Yes, necessary,” to her credit, Lucrezia Sforza didn’t flinch as lightning sparks ran along her arms. “As long as this fortress stood, it could be a final redoubt where the Army of Light and all of Ra’s creatures would find refuge when their most renowned strongholds will be dealt with. To ensure the defeat of our enemies, the price was worth paying.”

“This...” Alexandra cleared her throat. “This is the principle of ‘the end justifies the means’ to an extreme degree.”

“Yes.”

Alexandra thought over the matter for several seconds. There was a part of the puzzle she was missing. Sure, the Succubus was older than her, and had likely lived her childhood in a...Dark environment, no pun intended.

But no one at eighteen should be willing to kill tens of thousands of people as some kind of collateral damage. Not when they hadn’t done anything to her personally. And not when there was a non-negligible likelihood that when the non-magical governments discovered the tsunami was the work of the Exchequer, it would be war between the two separated societies of humans.

Unless...

“Who did you lose to them?”

“My eldest brother,” Lucrezia Sforza admitted. “They gutted him in front of me. And if not for the arrival of my mother, they would have done the same to me. They tortured him long enough for his ‘crimes’.”

For an instant, the eyes were red and inhuman. Then the Champion of Lust’s control re-established itself.

“He was eight.”

The worst part in this tale, was that Alexandra wasn’t even surprised by the atrocity. There was a reason the Trinity and the Army of Light were officially Light terrorist organisations in nearly ICW-affiliated country.

“I understand.” The green-eyed Champion grimaced. “I don’t condone what you’re doing in your quest of vengeance, but I understand. Thank you for the answers.”

Needless to say, this wasn’t good news. Even if her mother wasn’t a high-ranking member of the Exchequer, Lucrezia would stay loyal to them as long as the Army of Light was eradicated...something which was coming closer and closer, if the last cataclysms were any indication. You didn’t raze important fortresses unless you were ready for a final war against your enemies.

Wait a minute...the Third Task was ‘Assault of the Citadel’...was it a deliberate barb thrown in the face of the leaders of the Light?

It may be. No, it must be. This was not the kind of thing that could be pushed aside as a ‘coincidence’.

“But I don’t suppose you came here today just to apologise taking an adult appearance of my girlfriend and your organisation’s bloody actions.”

“I did not,” the now brown-eyed Venetian student admitted. “I came here to propose an alliance.”

For the first time in this conversation, Alexandra was really, really surprised.

“An alliance? Are you sure you’re getting things right? If anything it should be me who should try to contact you for a lot of information. You got three globe-clues during the last Task; I only got two. And since you showed your resourcefulness in three duels, I doubt the ‘Attack of the Citadel’ is going to be a problem for you. You are the Sforza Heiress, you have nearly unlimited currency and material resources compared to the average Champion, and while I don’t believe you live up to the mythical reputation of some legendary Potion-makers, your first name is still *Lucrezia*. Don’t try to tell me Potions is your major weakness academically, because I won’t believe you.”

“You’re right,” the blonde Champion of Lust smirked. “Potions aren’t my weakness. In fact, I’m the best in my year when it is time to use the cauldrons.”

A click of her fingers, and the Succubus’ indecent uniform turned entirely black, and became something more akin to a ‘modern’ non-magical school uniform. Well, apart from the length of the skirt. That would never be included in the rules when Succubi weren’t in charge.

“You are also right the third clue I stopped you from acquiring revealed far more interesting information than the first two did. It explained which type of Alchemical reagents the Judges will make available on the day of the Third Task. We don’t have a plan of the ‘citadel’ the arena will be turned into, but we have very extensive descriptions of the obstacles...I mean, the ‘challenge phases’. There are the time limits and the help one can receive for the brewing phases.”

“My congratulations,” Alexandra had already regretted deeply the time lost doing crocodile-wrestling, but it was worse now, “but since you don’t seem the type of witch which comes to gloat in front of her information-deprived enemies, I assume there is an issue.” Though the Potter Heiress had no idea what it was. With the same clues and a good dose of deception, Lucrezia Sforza had been a very dangerous opponent, and this had been in the field of Ancient Runes; one Alexandra had spent hundreds of hours adapting to have as few weaknesses as her limited years in the subject allowed. In Potions, the Venetian Succubus had all the advantages: realistically, Slughorn’s tutoring could not erase several years of advanced education *and* tutoring *plus* natural talent.

“Is it about the fact the sixteen Champions compete at the same time?”

“Not really,” well it was worth a try, “or more accurately, it’s the fact little is known save the fact we aren’t authorised to fight during the brewing phases which concerns me where our fellow Champions are mentioned. No, the fact we will enter the arena together is part of a bigger problem I noticed this morning: the third clue is more or less answering every question I had about the Third Task.”

“Err...yes...” Susan feigned to yawn next to her. When the Succubus mock-glared at her, the Bones Heiress smiled...something which resulted in Lucrezia Sforza turning her own hair a very familiar shade of crimson. Lust was not shy about imitating others, oh no... “That’s the principle of the Tournament Clues, no?”

“Yes,” the Venetian student conceded, “but why then was there a fourth ‘globe-clue’ the fastest Champion of the final duel could claim as a reward?”

Alexandra blinked...and winced when the realisation settled in. Yeah, now with the benefit of hindsight...allowing the Dark Queen to level the Egyptian temple of the Second Task may not have been that smart.

By the dark breath of Sauron...

“Just as hypothetical question...we assumed the purpose of this Task was to get through to the heart of the Citadel, and claim whatever clue awaits there. But is it said overtly anywhere in the book section you’ve been granted and that we have not?”

Lucrezia Sforza paused, and Alexandra could almost see the text memorised being replayed behind her changing blue eyes.

“It is not,” the Champion of Lust acknowledged. “Which makes me more wary of this Task. Especially what comes after.”

“The Fourth Task?”

“The Venetian Carnival.”

“It is important for a Venetian, I suppose,” Susan intervened. “But so far, every Task is organised inside the Coliseum.”

Her girlfriend’s eyes narrowed after the words, no doubt having the same realisation echoing through her mind; it was not because the Task was currently restricted to the new Coliseum built by the Scuola Regina that it would always be the case.

“You don’t want an alliance just for this Task, aren’t you?” Alexandra spoke slowly. “You want an alliance for the next two Tasks, where both of us might be hunted by the Army of Light when we aren’t protected by the presence of sixty thousand spectators.”

“Correct,” the Succubus gave her a splendid smile. “Your...unique abilities makes you a dangerous opponent that our enemies will struggle to find counters against.”

“Say the witch who survived a *Dragon of Lindworm* runic incantation without difficulty,” Alexandra ironically commented.

Lucrezia left her seat and approached her, making Alexandra wary...but it was only to deliver a whisper.

“I am Nundu, Hydra.”

Past the instant of assimilating the revelation...Alexandra wondered who would cause more panic if she transformed into her Animagus form when the Tournament was going on, Lucrezia or she.

“Fine.” There were many things a Nundu couldn’t do...like leaving everyone in the vicinity alive. Hydras would survive the poison with little difficulty, but ‘normal’ magical beings wouldn’t, which could cause a lot of problems if the civilians were too close. And there were other advantages she was granted as a Hydra Animagus... “And the Dark Queen?”

“Do you really think the Tsar’s daughter is going to propose an alliance of equals?”

“I don’t know,” the green-eyed British witch said lightly, “why don’t we ask her?”

Three seconds later, her eyes confirmed what her other senses had warned her: Lyudmila Romanov and her followers had entered the painting classroom.

“Since they’ve made the artistic effort to come here, I suppose we can...”

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“Alliances are for those who have not the strength to achieve their goals alone.”

Astrid was not surprised to hear those words coming from the Dark Queen’s mouth.

Neither, judging by their almost amused expressions, were the two other female Champions.

“In this case, the door is-“

“**I haven’t given you the permission to speak**,” Lyudmila said with her typical lack of diplomacy and her power flaring up. The Succubus closed her mouth. “I can make exceptions. I won’t make them for someone who consorts with a Dream Walker.”

The name meant nothing for the Sverre Heiress, but Roksana Vulchanova muttered something vulgar in Russian.

“Dream Walker?” Her cousin asked, visibly being as clueless as she was.

“They are relics of the ancient Wars of the Lights and Darkness. Think of one as an absolute Imperius Curse given to a witch or a wizard. They can infiltrate our very thoughts, break your former allegiances, mind-wipe you, transform a coward into the most dangerous fanatic in existence, and plenty more interesting things besides.”

“By the evil of Minas Morghul...” Alexandra Potter swore, and Astrid wondered where this curse was coming from; she certainly had never heard from it before. “Why the hell would someone create something so dangerous?”

The Dark Queen shrugged.

“You would have to ask the two old fossils. I’m sure they will be all too eager to answer the question. Anyway, her little friends,” green eyes stared mockingly at Lucrezia Sforza, “have one in their service. Being sworn to a Power creates a shield the Dream Walkers are unable to break through. But your followers won’t be so fortunate, unless they swear allegiance to you of their own will...or they aren’t wizards in the first place.”

“They used his capacities against you with Giovanni, didn’t they?”

The blonde-haired Succubus was not presented an amused expression, but one could definitely hear it in her voice.

“Yes. And since you’re here, you can give them a message,” oh, that was not good, not good at all... “If they think that what I am doing displeases them, the fossils can come challenge me in the arena. Save the British Champion present here, none of you have done anything impressive. Your masters and mistresses can continue hiding in the shadows...but if they continue attacking like they did, I will begin to disintegrate the opposition.”

“I will deliver the message,” the Venetian witch retorted frostily. “And it will be answered as your arrogance deserves.”

And Lucrezia Sforza left the classroom, clearly annoyed.

“Don’t you think antagonising everyone is a bit dangerous, even for you?” The Champion of Hogwarts commented lightly as she cleaned up her red-painted fingers with a rag.

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking about allying with her,” Lyudmila Romanov spoke as if she had not heard the last words. “They can’t win unless you allow them to.”

The vibrant green eyes showed a modicum of interest hearing this declaration.

“While I will be the first person to admit that it was my killing of Lorenzo de Medici which activated the first Seal, the Second Task has proven they don’t really need you or me specifically to activate more. In fact, now that I’m certain Romeo Malatesti is on their payroll, that makes two Champions of the Dark which will do whatever the Exchequer wants of them.”

“This is well-reasoned...but wrong.” The Dark Queen grinned, and it was quite frightening to look at her doing so. “They have only activated one Seal per Task to lure the Light into a sense of false security...and likely because rituals like those can’t be activated more than once per day. Given the number of Tasks they have left, what they’re in dire need of is time...time and Champions answering to their will. And I won’t bow to them.”

“Why do you have such hostility for them, Chaos?” Alexandra Potter asked with real curiosity. “Most of the reasons I don’t want an alliance with Lust is because her ‘end justifies the means’ horrifies me; in other words, ethics. I know for certain you don’t care about that. Having read what I read in the Scuola Regina’s library, you don’t have the background or the familial legacy to be a fierce defender of the Statute of Secrecy. And while no wizard of the Light was mentioned to have tried to assassinate you recently...you are hardly someone Ra and his lackeys will let live if they find the means to kill you.”

“My reasons are my own.” Lyudmila Romanov said in a tone Astrid had rarely heard before; a truly defensive voice. “And I don’t really need them anyway, Death. I am the Chosen of Chaos, remember?”

For a second, it looked like her cousin was going to scoff or push aside the argument...but the young dark-haired Champion clicked her tongue and went on to levitate wandlessly the pencils she had used for the...very ugly painting in front of her.

“You are what you are. But don’t say you weren’t warned. After all, I think we can all agree this Third Task is a prelude to something incredibly important. And if we can feel that one month away from it, the Exchequer and the Avatar of Darkness are not going to take chances with us. Those who go against their plans are going to be crushed.”

“You have no confidence in your Headmaster and the rest of the Light?”

This time the girl who was challenging Lyudmila in the Tournament’s rankings gave a true expression of disdain.

“Please. What are they going to do, try to poison us with the first Potion recipe which falls into their lap?”

**6 December 1994, Milan, Italy**

Henri de Condé had met only once Frode Falk before the potential Champions were invited to Vienna.

Henri had hoped the feelings that meeting had inspired him were wrong.

When it came down to it, the other wizard was a student of Durmstrang, and born from a Scandinavian family besides. They were both Champions of the Light, but it was unavoidable there would be major cultural differences.

The French pureblood wizard had repeated that before coming here...and it had not taken many seconds to acknowledge Lorenzo de Medici was not the only bigot the Army of Light was plagued with.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me the first time,” the Champion of Frigg said, “your performance so far in this Tournament is pitiful. And this applies to you too, Innocence.”

“Mighty words,” Eleonora glared at the Durmstrang student, “from someone who hasn’t been participating in the first two Tasks because he wasn’t even considered worthy to be a Champion or one of the primary substitutes. It’s true we haven’t won a single Task so far. You have failed to be selected for them.”

“Worse, you are consorting with the Enemy.” Frode was a block ice; it was like the words of the Champion of Vesta had never reached his ears.

“You have a very strange definition of ‘consorting’,” Henri breathed out. “But I suppose to someone like you, even talking to other Champions is akin to treason. No matter how disastrous this course of faction has proven in the past.”

“There must be no truce with the Enemy. Have you forgotten the threat the Dark Serpent slithering in the shadows represent?”

“I have not forgotten,” the Champion of Horus told the new Champion of Light who would enter the arena for the Third Task. “My mind also remembers perfectly what happened to the last Light Champions who tried to face Alexandra Potter and Lyudmila Romanov...one was buried with a sealed coffin. The other has failed to return from France at the time we’re speaking, despite the First Task being more than one month ago.”

“The strategy they used was flawed. My approach will succeed and rid us of the Dark vermin which infest Venetia’s heart.”

“Let’s say you aren’t completely delusional,” by Eleonora’s tone, she evidently had her doubts, “and that your idea has a chance to kill a Champion of the Dark. I fail to do how it will hurt the Avatar of Darkness and his organisation of army-killers. Chaos and Death aren’t currently sworn to the Old Monster. War’s Champion is the kind of thug that you can find at Durmstrang and other schools by the dozens. The only one whose loss may hurt them would be Lust, and given how many times you’ve tried to assassinate her, she will be on her guard.”

“They are born from evil.” Frode Falk said in a voice which wasn’t warmer than it had been at the beginning of this conversation. “They chose evil. If they live long enough, they will join the Greater Evil.”

Yes. Why would they not join the side who would accept them when the Light hunted them sometimes while they were barely able to walk? Why would they not oppose the Light when the Army of Light and the Trinity had killed their families, destroyed their homes, and forced them to flee into the night?

“You have not answered Eleonora’s question. Pre-empting someone from joining the Enemy is at best hindering the recruitment operations of the dark mind behind this whole Tournament. At which point is going to risk our lives against the Dark Champions going to do anything to prevent the true forces behind the Scuola Regina from triggering Seal after Seal?”

“I wouldn’t have believed a Champion of Horus could be such a coward.”

Henri glanced at the pale eyes of the Champion of Frigg and didn’t try to hide the disgust he was feeling for the other Champion.

“And you...you are so courageous you have certainly the most dangerous Champion of the Dark to be born this century in your school. Yet Lyudmila Romanov has never attacked you. One can only wonder why.”

“Chaos knows someone who can inflict debilitating pain when it sees it.”

“I’m more of the opinion she considers your continued existence a joke,” the Scuola Regina female Champion countered. “Did you fail to notice she was holding *Gungnir* during the last Task?”

“I noticed.” For the first time, anger arrived in Frode Falk’s voice. “The favourite psychopath of Loki will be the first to die. I know her weakness. And you will help me.”

“Out of the question,” Henri didn’t believe Frode Falk was saying the truth, but even if he didn’t lie, he wasn’t going to entertain such a suicidal mission. It would be already hellishly dangerous in normal conditions; when the Third Task was about Potions, the danger was extreme.

“You will. Or the Archmage will intervene personally to teach your families the Light does not tolerate traitors within its ranks.”

**7 December 1994, Alexandra’s Villa, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

“I bet you are congratulating yourself for supporting my Alchemist studies now.”

Alexandra smiled as she levitated several Potion books.

“The thought came to my mind,” the Potter Heiress recognised. “Well, that and accepting Professor Slughorn as my Potions Tutor. Knowing how an Alchemical reagent is used won’t help a lot if you’re completely incapable of brewing something. I’m only a beginner in the subject, but I can already tell the art of melting a cauldron is not what the Judges are expecting of us poor Champions.”

“How wise of you,” Cho Chang nodded with apparent respect – all the while the Chinese-looking witch was rolling her eyes. “I suppose you’ve already a good idea why Alchemical reagents will be used?”

“Time,” the green-eyed Champion replied bluntly, “the problem with a Task were Potions is involved has always been a challenge because you need to make it interesting for the spectators. And you can’t do that if the Champions stay over a dozen hours monitoring the progress of their Potion...assuming they aren’t forced to stop at some point and try it again.”

“Indeed,” the older Ravenclaw approved before looking more thoughtful. “I suppose the Judges could have made a Task where everyone had to prepare his or her Potions beforehand, though.”

“They could,” the Champion of Death had thought about it since she had learned the content of the text inside the book-clue by heart. “But it would be a massive door open for all sort of cheating. There’s no way the Judges or anyone else could control who is brewing what. Runes for the Second Task was a very specialist field, and Hieroglyphs were an esoteric choice for the Second Task’ information. But there are potentially thousands of Potions Masters in Europe who would be available to brew dangerous Potions.”

“Alchemical reagents are not exactly cheap,” Cho objected, “and I don’t think it is going to prevent all cheating.”

“Only all the Powers of the Light and the Dark working together could prevent cheating,” Alexandra raised her eyebrows ironically. “Though it is going to be more complicated than you think. We don’t know the complete rules for the Task ahead.”

“Agreed.” Cho checked her black hair was perfectly combed before continuing. “I don’t think we can expect a brewing phase to last more than one hour. That means I’m going to have to instruct you on all the reagents which are allowing a Potion-maker to skip procedures and the simmering phases, which always take the majority of a brewer’s time.”

“This sounds logical.” Alexandra sighed. “And since you don’t know enthused at the project, I assume it is not looking good.”

“Err...”

Alexandra gave her second substitute her best ‘give me the bad news’ expression.

“First, I will have to teach Cedric and you together, two hours per day, while also following my own classes to increase my own knowledge in the subject.”

“That’s fine,” the Ravenclaw Champion accepted the condition. Cedric Diggory was hardly the most unbearable Hogwarts Champion, and two hours was a maximum for extra-studies; she would have to ask Slughorn for high-level Potion brewing too. “And I also must warn you I’m not in the battle-Potions.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. I want a wide range of Potions, not just the battle-purpose ones...given how much we ignore about the Third Task, I think we better not dedicate ourselves to frontal attacks, otherwise disappointment would wait us on that path. And since we broach the subject...Lucrezia Sforza revealed the list of authorised reagents was a large part of the third clue.”

“It was?” Cho frowned. “Souls of my ancestors, it’s really not good.”

“It will really make that much a difference?”

“Without reading the clue myself, asserting how much it matters is a bit difficult, isn’t it?” the girlfriend of Cedric played with her wand as her eyes narrowed in calculation. “I suppose that since you aren’t giving me a copy of this clue right now, the offer comes with conditions you are not happy with.”

“Yes.” Alexandra admitted with a large grimace. “Should I repeat ‘I don’t trust her’ again?”

“No, you’ve spoken it enough times today. But while you can likely survive the loss of Tournament points such an handicap will translate into...not to mention survive without difficulty the Task itself...I’m not sure Cedric can’t.”

“I notice you aren’t concerned about the other Champions. Don’t want to invite them to your Alchemy private lessons?”

“I don’t waste my time with lost causes,” the last descendant of the Ming Wizarding dynasty ruthlessly spoke. “And that’s exactly what those two are as soon as you mention the word ‘cauldron’.”

**9 December 1994, Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

“Do you know how many high-level brewing techniques are waiting for us until we pass our Potion NEWTs?”

“I don’t know,” Morag admitted with a cheerful smile. “Too many?”

“Too bloody many, exactly!” Alexandra groaned theatrically as they joined the hundreds of students abandoning the Scuola Regina’s classrooms so that they could go to the dinner hall.

“Do you really want to speak about it public, though?” her red-haired Ravenclaw friend teased her.

“My dear Morag,” the Champion of House Ravenclaw dramatically began, “I’m sure there is someone inside those splendid halls and corridors who is unaware the Third Task is about Potions. But I have no honest who that person is. I mean, four hours ago I saw Romeo Malatesti arguing with Giovanni Ruspoli about Alchemical reagents in the library, and the Champion of Ares didn’t get any clue last Task.”

“No...and he should be too busy constructing this enormous crocodilian temple in the north-west to decipher the clues. You think someone helped him?”

“That or he blatantly bribed Lucrezia Sforza to have the third clue.”

“You have that poor an opinion of the Succubus, Alex?”

“On the contrary,” the Potter Heiress replied seriously, “when it comes to negotiation, I have the greatest respect for the daughter of the local Headmistress. I’m sure that if hypothetically our bloodthirsty Champion of War came to grab the clue, she made him pay an exorbitant price which will advantage her in many aspects thorough the Third Task and later.”

“That sounds...disturbingly accurate,” Morag agreed, “unfortunately.”

“Unfortunately,” Alexandra repeated ironically.

“You need more cheerful news!” Morag grinned so widely Alexandra’s Hydra senses were instantly on high alert. “This afternoon, Lucrezia Sforza was spreading again her lustful aura across the school...you know, the one which makes you think she’s the right witch for you...I know what I am speaking, I only like boys, and I wondered if I would make an exception...”

“Please continue giving me this...absolutely not piece of blackmail, my dear...” the raven-haired witch chuckled.

“Ouch. Well, after she rejected three or four boys of her own school wishing to invite her to the ball, the Succubus was asked by someone who had succumbed to her power.” Morag bared her teeth. “Leo Black.”

“No...” Alexandra gloated loudly. “The Black Heir himself? Asking a confirmed Succubus to the event of the year?”

There was a hypocrisy threshold, and Leo Black had just broken through it effortlessly.

“To be fair, he looked a bit dazzled at first,” Morag cheerfully retold the scene, “and that was when Sforza called him ‘little boy’, and told him...err...she told him in Italian something very impolite. Something about Light wizards having nothing between their legs and stepping into shoes too big for them.”

Ouch. The Champion of Lust had really not decided to go for a small humiliation didn’t she?

“But of course, Leo didn’t understand Italian, so he only took offense at the ‘little boy’ nickname.” Morag told her with relish. Alexandra shook her head at the stupidity...not to mention the weak will of the son of Sirius Black. “Naturally, it’s all over the school by now.”

“Those two are not going to spend their holidays together...” The Champion of the Morrigan commented drily.

“How could they, when she doesn’t want near him for an evening?”

Truly, even when Gryffindor had its pride trampled in the arena, they managed to do ‘better’ outside of it.

“Now let’s speak of the seduction methods of a certain Ronald Weasley...”

Alexandra started to laugh before another word was uttered.

**Author’s note**: Onwards for the Third Task! But first there is a Winter Ball coming...and for some Champions it will be the last of their (very short) life.

And yes, the Third is going to be about Potions. I consider it a truly regrettable fact that in canon, there was no Task about it when we consider how much canon Harry hated a certain teacher (and by extension the class). I consider as such my duty to repair that mistake...

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