**Chapter 110**

**Civil War’s End**

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

Alexandra woke up.

Since she really didn't remember going to bed in the first place, it undoubtedly meant she had been suffering from magical exhaustion.

Something that was...incredibly credible, as fresh and horrible memories flashed in her mind.

But it was over.

It was over...and she had no idea where she was.

It wasn't one of the bedrooms she had ever been in before, of that the Potter Heiress was sure. Everything around her had a style which could be described as typically Venetian, be it the large wooden bed, the mirror, or the chandeliers, so a few guesses could be made.

And when she opened the windows, Alexandra could admire the secret garden of Ca'Sforza Palace...which was one mystery solved.

The Basilisk Slayer hadn't had much time to contemplate the not-so-silent ambiance – there were many, many wizards rushing everywhere below the balcony – before the door of her bedroom opened...and Susan entered.

"Ah, you finally woke up!" her Hufflepuff girlfriend cheerfully proclaimed. "We were beginning to wonder if you were going to sleep for another day!"

"Another day?" Alexandra raised an eyebrow.

"It's the twentieth and morning is almost over," Susan explained before hugging her, and Alexandra returned the embrace. "You slept for more than thirty hours, Alex."

"Oh," the Ravenclaw Champion managed to utter, before realising it was not that much of a surprise. "Well, I was already very tired when I returned to Venice. We drank a lot of Potions before the last battle to be in peak condition...I suppose we had to pay for it in the end. I don't think I slept after sleeping on the moss in the middle of Avalon's forests-"

"You went to Avalon?" Susan interrupted her with a very excited tone. "Really?"

"Err...yes. Nobody mentioned it?" Alexandra frowned. "I would have thought my fellow Champions would have mentioned it...perhaps not our fearsome Dark Queen, but Malatesti and Eleonora da Riva-"

"Malatesti was sent to a Venetian hospital while we dragged you to a bed, Alex. And all the other Champions we saw were as exhausted as you were, so it isn't like we had much information either. Sforza and Delacour were awake, but the former stayed very tight-lipped, and the latter didn't speak much except with her family."

"Ah, that explains a lot." The young witch passed a hand through her hair, before acknowledging staying in night clothes was kind of ridiculous right now. "Changelina, my Ravenclaw robes, please."

The magical creation immediately obeyed, which was...a relief. After swords and a wand were lost, the green-eyed girl really didn't want to have to replace this artefact too, assuming it was possible in the short-term.

"So yeah, I went to Avalon. And then to London, to give Galahad-possessing-Black a much needed lesson in humility."

"That one I am aware of," her girlfriend cheekily replied. "Your little duel on Westminster Bridge has already become a small legend on its own. Seriously, Alex, using a Dreadnought to destroy Azkaban?"

"In some situations, overwhelming firepower has a certain simplicity," the Champion of Death replied virtuously. "Speaking of which, what happened to the Black moron and his saviour?"

"He's no longer a Black, the House cast him out," the Bones Heiress smiled carnivorously. "From what my aunt said, he's still at Saint Mungo's, most of the time the Healers are keeping him in a magical coma, otherwise he's screaming in agony. The Grail's destruction removed some curses, but he was already so badly crippled there's not much the best magical practitioners of Saint Mungo's can do. Unless you want to heal him?"

"Not a chance in hell," Alexandra smirked. "And Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore was in front of the Wizengamot a few hours ago, trying to convince the Houses and the Ministry to not arrest him and put him in the custody of the non-magical government as an accomplice to Galahad-Leo's murderous rampage."

Well, it seemed a lot had happened since they left London...

"Fudge didn't try to stop it? Somehow, I don't think he's the kind of Minister who will accept wizards being arrested and judged by non-wizards..."

"He wouldn't, but unfortunately for him, he was arrested by the Prime Minister's security service."

"What?"

"Oh, yes, this is a very big humiliation for him and everyone who might have ever supported him," Susan didn't gloat, but she wasn't far from it. "Obviously, the moment it was revealed he tried to cast a spell and got disarmed and knocked unconscious for it...the Wizengamot voted near-unanimously to remove him from office. This time, everybody agreed the vote of no-confidence was really necessary. So Fudge is in a non-magical jail, and Scrimgeour is the temporarily-acting Minister until there's an election."

When you thought about it...maybe 'a lot' wasn't enough to do it justice.

"What a chaotic mess," the Champion of the Morrigan huffed. "Anyway, once I left London, I returned to Avalon for a few hours, and then we travelled to Athens and the Acropolis. After that-"

"ALEX!"

A storm of brown hair charged in the bedroom, and her name was Hermione Granger. A second later, Alexandra found herself hugged and shaken by her expert librarian-friend.

"We were so worried for you when you collapsed in magical exhaustion!"

"I'm fine, Hermione...I was just a bit tired...fighting too many battles one after another isn't easy, you know."

"Of course you would say that," the former Gryffindor grumbled, before releasing her from her embrace, and letting the Ravenclaw Champion focus on all her other friends, who had evidently followed Hermione here...

"Let's see the positive side of the situation," Nigel smiled, and Alexandra didn't need to be a Hydra Animagus to smell trouble. "We got an excellent headline for today's *Loud Duck*! We already sold five thousand copies, and the day is far from over!"

And of course the unrepentant journalist unfurled a very familiar newspaper.

There was a magical image of Alexandra right as she left the Basilica di San Marco...but it was the title which was taking most of her attention.

**ALEXANDRA SAVES THE WORLD! (AGAIN)**

The green-eyed witch groaned loudly.

"Please tell me you didn't sell it in the streets of Venice..."

"Of course we did!" Luna protested to her rising horror. "The Nargles were very satisfied."

"Traitors," the Champion of Death hissed, wondering if it was still possible to race out of Ca'Sforza and burn as many copies as feasible immediately. It was going to be difficult, assuredly. "I, the mighty Night Queen, will counterattack and-"

Her stomach began to growl. Very loudly. And this made Alexandra realise that while she had slept for many hours, she had skipped a lot of meals.

"But first I want to eat a large and delicious breakfast." She was forced to admit.

Naturally, all her treacherous friends laughed and cheered...

**20 February 1995, a secret hideout of the Night Court, Venice**

Somehow, Astrid wasn't the least surprised that after spending the better part of two days sleeping, Lyudmila Romanov still managed to spread an aura of dread the moment she entered a room.

Even if she did yawn a couple of seconds later, which considerably ruined the effect.

"The Fourth Task's rules were in certain aspects ignored by the Army of Light," the Dark Queen began with a significant ironic drawl, "I understand the Judges want to speak to us about it?"

That was a way to look at it, all right, Astrid was sure. The main rule had been not to break the Statute of Secrecy. You didn't need to be a Judge to know that rule had been broken utterly and permanently. As for the other things that they were forbidden to do, those had been violated as well. It was as if the Day Court had been engaged in frenetic attempts to destroy the Tournament...something that couldn't be discarded, given the mind-altering spells some had been under.

"Yes," Roksana replied with a nod, "the Judges have scheduled a meeting in front of the Basilica in...about three hours now. We were informed it would be in public, and that all the Champions and members of the three Courts had to be present."

Katharina Feuerbach snickered.

"'Those who remain alive have to be present' would have been a more accurate command."

"This is in really bad taste," Astrid retorted after the German witch threw her dark-humoured bile, "it was not-"

The older witch didn't let her finish.

"In case you forgot, once the Day Court was finished exterminating the Champions they faced and the rest of the Exchequer, they would have gone after us. They would have found us, and they would have cut our throats while we were unconscious. I, for one, think the Day Court's destruction was everything they deserved. It's just a pity you weren't able to kill them all, Lyudmila."

If anything, this seemed to amuse the Dark Queen.

"Without false modesty, I think you should thank Alexandra Potter, not me. It was Death's Chosen who killed or crippled most of the Day Court's members. As far as I remember, I only killed one of their Guards. On the other hand, the sword of the Morrigan killed most of those who were imprisoned in the Ducal Palace, including Falk."

"And what she did to de Condé was really fantastically ironic," Irina pointed out. "He isn't dead, but it's been the talk of half of Europe."

"Plus her duel against the mad boy proclaiming himself King of Britannia," Astrid sighed. "When it comes to renown, she is by far the most famous Champion, both for magical and non-magical beings now."

"Don't worry, I will catch up in due time," Lyudmila Romanov promised, and if anything, it indeed worried all four witches present in the room. "Back to the Tournament. Unless there's a monumental surprise, I think we can all agree that the Judges are going to end the Fourth Task this afternoon. The end of the Statute will ensure it is properly impossible to continue the good organisation of the civil war competition."

Irina Sydorenko cleared her throat.

"I think you're right. Do you want us to begin the preparations so all our creations return to the Scuola Regina?"

"Yes."

"What a pity we weren't able to use so many of them...it feels like a waste..."

"The Tournament is not over." The Dark Queen was back, and the five words, even devoid of any threat, were accompanied by an expression which would have impressed a prey bird. "I have invested too much of my abilities in it to abandon it now!"

In many ways, this was admirable...or it may have been if the Fourth Task had not created an impressive pile of corpses.

Of course, Astrid didn't really care about it, for as long as the Dark Queen was in the game, her substitutes – aka Astrid and all the other Durmstrang girls – were relatively safe.

But there was another problem. And it wasn't a slight one.

"I commend your...dedication, Archduchess," Roksana began hesitantly, "but while you were asleep, orders have come from Saint Petersburg. The Tsar is ordering you to return home."

Many Russian students of Durmstrang had received the same command, and though some rumours were no doubt exaggerated, everyone knew the reason behind them.

War.

Unlike many nations where the interactions between magical and non-magical people had created full panic before returning to something approaching calm in the last twenty-four hours, Russia had erupted in violence and bloodshed. And it showed every sign of escalating from what they had heard.

"According to the rumours," Katharina continued, "the Exchequer managed to disarm both the nuclear bombs of Moscow and the army-killer artefacts of Saint Petersburg. But that only prevented them from unleashing annihilation methods in the first forty-eight hours. It is becoming worse and worse. And I have no doubt that the Tsar-"

"The Tsar wants his favourite weapon back, now that he can't unleash the old ones, yes, I understand."

There was something in the green eyes of the Dark Queen...it was not hesitation, not really. It was way too cold and determined to be called hesitation.

"That makes it simpler. I won't return home." The Champion of Loki bared her teeth.

Roksana Vulchanova, visibly didn't find any amusement in the retort.

"This is treason we're speaking about!"

"No," the Dark Queen answered, in a tone filled with genuine puzzlement. "Treason would imply that I was loyal to him once. My only allegiance has always been to **Chaos**...and I swore I would participate in the European Magical Tournament to the end. That's what I am going to do...and if the Tsar isn't happy, he can come duel me in person, and we will see of us two who is the strongest."

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

"Truly the Champion of Chaos continues to surprise me," Narses pointed out as the conversation between the students of Durmstrang ended and the Charm they had used to listen to each and every word was cancelled.

"It is called Chaos for a reason, Knight General. If it wasn't so unpredictable, we would have called it Order long ago."

"Yes..."

"I'm truly happy both of you seem to find so much amusement with it," Knight Summoner intervened in her usual frustrated voice, "but you didn't answer my question. What are you going to do with Loki's Chosen? Since this Fenrir Animagus intends to stay here until the Summer Solstice, she will be an important part of the game!"

"Summoner," the orange-cloaked Herald remarked with a hint of annoyance, "if you think the Champion of Chaos returning to Saint Petersburg would have made sure she was out of the game, then I wonder what kind of substance you intoxicated yourself with in the last few nights. We would have gotten a few months of peace...then we would have had to deal with a Dark Lady launching demonic hordes upon this world."

"Speaking from experience, *Genghis*?"

Even with the orange mask hiding most of his face, Narses could acknowledge the face of the other Knight stayed inflexible.

"That name isn't mine anymore. Once I swore my magic and intelligence to Semerkhet Osiris, I once again took the name of Temüjin."

At any point now, *He* would have intervened.

He would have been here to calm the tempers. He would have been there to guide them towards a new plan, enforce the implacable will of the Dark.

But no longer.

He was no longer here.

And for what was not the first time in the last thirty-six hours, the former strategist of the Eastern Roman Empire knew he really missed his King.

"What are we going to do?" Mulan of the Hua asked, immobile in her red costume. And the two other Knights knew she wasn't speaking of the Romanov witch this time.

"I wanted to return to the steppes, live a nomadic life once more, feel the winds upon my skin," Temüjin said melancholically, "but it seems it will have to wait for a few years. The defeat of Apophis is taking utmost priority."

"Indeed," Narses agreed. "If we fail, I think the death of Ra will taste extremely bitter for most of the time we will have left. Do you think...the Archmage-"

"Was he Possessed or influenced by this abomination?" The wizard who had once ruled one of the largest empires of this world shook his head. "I don't think so. The King would have felt it at one time or another. He fought the Light Avatar for millennia, after all. And we were active against Ra for centuries too, when it comes to it. Moreover, the magical...revulsion we all felt was quite distinctive. The idea that this abomination was capable of hiding itself for millennia stretches credibility, I will say. I'm more of the opinion it stayed in the abyss, watching, monitoring, and maybe, just maybe, ensuring Ra's ego and arrogance grew uncontrollably."

"I fear you are right," the Knight General sighed.

And unfortunately, they would never know for sure. Ra was dead, and it wasn't like a single word of what Apophis said could be trusted. The abomination felt like a perversion of Corruption...yes, he was aware of his words' irony.

"Where did it come from?" Knight Summoner asked after several seconds of silence between themselves...not complete silence, as around them, hundreds of non-magical tourists celebrated the end of the time-freezing and the return of some 'normal' circumstances, along with the sights of a volcano and a magical lake.

"All I can say is that it was not human, nor an animal species which somehow grew to sentience," the Knight Herald replied.

"An experiment which turned badly?" Narses proposed. "While we were really prudent for the big experiments, we had our fair share of abysmal failures in our time. Is it possible Keter would have created their own nemesis?"

"It may not be of this world."

All Knights of the Exchequer were powerful, magically and in many other aspects. They had to be, otherwise they would have stayed Bishops...or likely perished in the countless battles against the Army of Light these last centuries.

"Another dimension?" Summoner wondered out loud.

"Maybe," Knight Herald grunted. "Or another world. Our non-magical cousins have proved interplanetary travel is possible, just extremely time-consuming and resource-intensive."

"I suppose finding the origins of Apophis is indeed something we need to discover urgently. And we need to make sure the last pieces don't reunite with the rest of the soul shards trapped in the Dark Sun. Otherwise..."

Otherwise they wouldn't live a single year after this monster freed itself.

Narses had no doubt they would go down fighting, casting spells that would burn cities to the ground in a titanic onslaught of lethal curses.

But they would perish, in the end.

"Will all the Knights follow the Queen?"

Knight Summoner scoffed.

"The fact you invited us two here today is clear evidence you're convinced several won't. Otherwise you wouldn't have decided to use your free time like this."

"I wouldn't have said it like that," Temüjin smiled. "But you have a point. The problem is not that the Queen lacks power, skill, experience, or willingness to innovate. She has all of that, and more. Otherwise the King wouldn't have chosen her to be his Queen in the first place."

"Vision," the Knight General said, "and charisma too, to some degree. The Queen does have them, but not to the same levels the King wielded effortlessly. While Ra was alive, it wouldn't have been a problem. But now that is he dead..."

"Yes. The great and ambitious members of our organisation will soon desire a new vision, straight out of the mouth of someone which will create the boundaries of the new Dark."

Morgane Rys'Ygraine Avalon, aka Isis, aka Morgana La Fay, wasn't the witch which could temper and guide these ambitions and goals.

No, it wasn't the problem of being a vampire. Though it didn't help, there would have been solutions for that predicament. On the other hand, the long 'life' and the time spent fighting the Army of Life for vengeance and survival weren't exactly good for adaptation skills.

"There are only two Champions of the Dark left now."

"Yes. There are only two Dark Champions left. And since we know one is completely unsuitable..."

"The Queen's new Apprentice may be the one."

"Yes, she may be. But will she want to don the mantle at the end of the journey?"

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

If anyone had any doubts Alexandra was really hungry...well, the first minutes of her 'breakfast' were enough to demolish them.

Morag knew that the Hydra inside Alex allowed her to eat a lot, and this was proven in a clear and non-ambiguous manner here. Eggs, pastries, cereals, marmalade, sausages, and many, many more things disappeared into her mouth, accompanied by over a dozen glasses of fruit juice.

"So," the Champion of House Ravenclaw said once her stomach finally appeared to be satiated, "this is a relatively modest room you have here, compared to the rest of your Palace."

The Succubus, who had so far watched her silently, rolled her eyes.

"Most of what I showed you was built to amaze all our visitors, Alexandra. We have a life outside the ballrooms and the Tournament celebrations. Not all of us fancy using a marble bath every day, or dining with a fifty metres-long table."

"Hmm...I see."

The room was certainly not built to amaze, but Morag thought it had to be nonetheless expensive. The tables, the chairs, and most of the furniture around them looked like they belonged to a style two hundred years old, and it had certainly not been found anywhere near Venice.

The porcelain and the pieces of silverware looked like very high luxury items too...

And Alexandra shrugged.

"You said something about the Judges wanting to speak with us."

"Yes," Lucrezia Sforza, who looked mostly like her pre-Task-self and not the Aztec High Priestess they had seen during the night battle, answered. "I suppose they want every Champion...well, every Champion who survived the Fourth Task and the massacres so far to be in front of them. They are most likely going to formally end the Carnival Civil War."

"With the Statute broken, most of the Task's foundations are already gone," Alexandra agreed before resuming her devouring of pastries and eggs. "Besides, there must not be that many Champions of the Day Court left."

"More than you think," the Venetian Succubus smirked, and Morag imitated her, knowing what was coming. "The French Healers managed to save Henri de Condé after you sent him smashing through the stained-glass windows of Notre-Dame of Paris, greatest Cathedral of France."

"Oh...yeah, I suppose I did." Alexandra paused after a moment of hesitation. "I didn't know where my Runic Galdr was going to send him, to be honest, and, as I said to McLaggen and Diggory, I really didn't care. They managed to neutralise the poison, then?"

"And even reattach his arm," the other Champion confirmed. "The time-freezing was a boon for Henri de Condé in that regard."

This, if anything, didn't seem to please Alexandra very much. And it wasn't hard to guess why.

"Is he still brainwashed?"

"As far as the Healers have been able to determine...he isn't. Not anymore. The power of the Light...brainwashing...it was already fading, and it broke completely by the time Ra held his last breath."

"It could be a manipulation and an attempt to make us lower our guard."

"Yes, but there was the example of the former Champion of Fate too."

This time it was very hilarious to see Alexandra groan very loudly between two bites.

"Longbottom is still alive? Of course, who I am kidding, he is alive."

Several very rude insults were muttered in four different languages in the next seconds.

Surprisingly, Lucrezia Sforza spoke to defend the Boy-Who-Lived.

"He was an idiot."

"His idiocy could have led all of us to a very painful and unpleasant end." Alexandra was decidedly in one of her stubborn moods. "I would prefer to be sure he doesn't represent a threat and-"

"Death," the Succubus' voice was courteous and pleasant, but something very dangerous was beginning to rise underneath. "It's enough. De Condé and Longbottom are not Champions of any Power, they are going to live with the fact their stupid choices could have led to the annihilation of Venice and everything they cared about. Furthermore, half of their life-expectancy is gone, the Grail is gone, but its disappearance didn't change everything in that regard. And due to their massive injuries, their health isn't what it was. They are going to have to be very careful from now on, both with their magical cores and their bodies."

The two witches stared at each other...and it was Alexandra who broke contact first.

"Have it your own way," her friend grumbled before eating an entire egg in vengeance. "I won't touch them as long as they stay sane and don't attack me. If they continue to be stupid or the brainwashing reactivates, I assure you, I won't give them one more chance."

"Of course, you have the right to defend yourself." Lucrezia assured the Champion of House Ravenclaw. "Do you have any other questions?"

"As a matter of fact...yes, I have one." Alexandra suddenly was...thoughtful. "Do you know where Dumbledore went after facing the Wizengamot?"

**20 February 1995, Hogwarts, Scotland**

Hogwarts was silent when Albus climbed the marble stairs of the entrance.

It was unsurprising, really, for the students were gone.

After the Statute of Secrecy was broken utterly, the storms of mail owls had begun to fly, and Hogwarts hadn't been spared from it.

The parents had panicked.

Albus wasn't sure he could blame them.

There had been some hope, no matter how forlorn or illogical, that everything could be repaired in the end. It was utter nonsense, of course; billions of Muggles, not millions, *billions*, had been shown magic existed. There was no going back to the days of the Statute.

One would need a grand ritual which would erase knowledge of magic's existence from every non-wizard and non-witch, and Albus hadn't any idea how something like that would be cast.

Yes, the Statute had been enforced long ago, so it was definitely possible, but he hadn't been alive then...and no matter how powerful, this was not the kind of thing a Lord-level wizard could do alone. You would need hundreds, maybe thousands of Lord-level wizards and witches for that.

Honestly, it was best to stop thinking about this unfeasible idea.

The Statute was gone. And its era would never come back.

As the Headmaster began the long walk to his office, Minerva of course was there to intercept him.

"There was no issue with the students?"

"No, Albus. They've all returned home."

"Filius?"

"He left one hour ago for Venice. As we all agreed, he will represent Hogwarts for the rest of the Tournament...though I am not optimistic it will last more than a few hours."

"I think we may be surprised in that regard," the silver-bearded wizard said whimsically. "After the...the catastrophe of the Fourth Task, the Dark minds behind that Tournament are in need of all the influence and power they can buy and steal. A few more Tasks might be exactly what they need."

"Of course, you might be wrong, Albus."

Minerva didn't say 'like you were wrong about a lot of things lately', for she was loyal, but the Defeater of Grindelwald heard it nonetheless.

"I might be wrong." He conceded. "At least the Board supported sending Filius in my stead."

"It is perhaps the only thing they will agree with you on for a long time." Sadly, this was no exaggeration, alas.

"I'm perfectly aware of that, I assure you."

For a couple of minutes, the only noise that could be heard was the sound of their footsteps.

Hogwarts had never felt colder or more distant.

"You shouldn't have done it. Maybe if it had truly been Mister Black fighting...but it was not. It was just a monster wearing his face."

"Yes. It was a dangerous folly...and I will pay the price for a long time."

In the end, in wanting to save someone from this disaster, Albus could admit he had saved no one.

Leo Black was still about to die, along with the soul that had merged with his; the only difference was that it was going to take far more time for the demise to arrive, and he had, in the meantime, handed the Dark priceless advantages so they could sully his name while remaining relatively truthful.

"There is some good news, as tiny and unremarkable as it might sound in this dark hour. I have been given enough Alchemical reagents and creations by finding one of the Archmage's caches that I can delay the...issues with Hogwarts' wards for a few more years."

"Really?" Minerva was as surprised as he had been when confronting the legacy of Ra's manipulations and lies. "I thought he didn't have the resources and the skill to resolve some of the problems you hired him for."

"So did I," Albus acknowledged. "Unfortunately, it would be more exact to say Ra had not the intention to invest those resources anywhere near Hogwarts. Now that I know...I should never have trusted the Archmage."

The Avatar of the Light had the power he claimed to wield, absolutely.

But this power had been used for a Light that was in many ways just as disgusting as the Dark he pretended to fight against.

Those were probably his two most glaring mistakes of the last three years, the old Headmaster reflected. Trusting Ra and allowing Hogwarts to enter the European Magical Tournament. Those two decisions had sounded too good to be true, and they were.

"Mercifully, few students were killed because of my failings during the Fourth Task," Albus pursued as the gargoyle guarding his office came into view. "I feared the worst for Mister Weasley, but it appears Miss Potter didn't kill him, though he is severely traumatised by his ordeals."

The latter was very normal, for the cells of the Ducal Palace had been a bloodbath. As had the streets of Venice, to be honest. The headmaster of Hogwarts was very glad the Order of the Phoenix had not been involved in that battle; otherwise it would have perished with the Army of Light and many Death Eaters of Tom Riddle.

"One would be traumatised by far less," the Senior Professor of Transfiguration agreed. "But I fear you have lost all the respect and support they might have had for you."

"The Champions?"

"The Heads of House and the Professors," Minerva corrected, and Albus winced.

"I suppose...I suppose I deserve it. And I will explain myself this evening."

"And once you do, Albus?"

"Once it is done, I will prepare for the next battles." The Defeater of Grindelwald grimaced. "For I fear Venice was just the beginning..."

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

It was really strange to see the Plaza di San Marco so crowded once more.

Fortunately for her peace of mind, the Plaza was very different under sunlight. When one added the Carnival's decorations, one might almost believe it was an entirely different location altogether.

Watching from the windows of the Museo Correr, Alexandra remembered the opening stage of the Fourth Task.

It would be easy to let yourself be trapped by the illusion that everything was the same, that somehow, they had gone back in time and were given a second chance to enjoy their time in Venice.

That wasn't the case.

Everything had changed.

The crowd of non-magical people who had been invited to this improvised ceremony *knew*.

They *knew* magic existed, and that the tales of wizards and dragons were real. Well, for now, they may not know about the dragons, but when it came to the wizards and the witches, there was no doubt whatsoever that they knew.

The Fourth Task was supposed to be like theatre: you donned a mask and a costume, played a role, and removed it at the end of the day, never to use it again save for fun and giggles.

Unfortunately, that scenario had utterly collapsed in blood and tragedy, and now the masks were those they had presented to everyone.

Alexandra Potter breathed out and then turned to face the surviving Champions.

"You were observing us from here?"

At least once the brainwashing was removed, there were things which didn't change...

"Of course she did," Romeo Malatesti answered arrogantly for her. The mantle of War was no longer his, but the Venetian had not changed his behaviour at all. "Storming the Plaza without a base to retreat to would not be tactically sound. I did the same with the Ducal Palace."

*And you are a moron for not having done the same.*

While the 'Dark Doge' for once did not say the undiplomatic words, the Basilisk Slayer did not have any difficulty hearing them as if they had been uttered aloud.

If his reddening skin was any indication, Longbottom had heard them too.

Longbottom.

For all that she had seen him several times, Alexandra had difficulties associating the Boy-Who-Lived with the seemingly eighteen-year-old young man in front of her.

In looks, you could have believed the previous Longbottom and this one were cousins, separated by four or five years of age, but still...

The power of the Grail was really a monstrous thing.

Not that it had been sufficient to keep him from receiving a significant number of battle-scars from her magic. His head was more or less preserved save one or two scratches, but the arms looked particularly bad, no matter how hard his robes tried to cover them.

"Well if the Day King amazed me with something, it was not with his intelligence." Alexandra had promised Lucrezia she would not kill him, but she wasn't ever going to let her guard down with the former Champion of Fate.

"Hey! The Day Court-"

"Silence," Alexandra hissed.

Longbottom had at least the good sense to shut his mouth immediately.

"For the record, Champions of the Day Court," the Ravenclaw Champion said coldly, "I know what happened when Lucas Gauthier told Ra to screw himself."

"We were brainwashed! We drank from the Grail!"

"Because you were stupid enough to believe Ra cared about the rules of the Tournament in the first place!" Alexandra snarled. "And your brainwashing must be a really cold comfort to those of your Court who are now gone or crippled. Anything to say, Champion De Condé?"

"No," the French Pure-Blood shook his head. "I have no excuses."

Well, at least the former Champion of Horus was far more intelligent than Longbottom ever was...not that Alexandra was terribly surprised by it, mind you.

"Good. In order to avoid any misunderstandings, I am going to speak bluntly. From now on, everyone in this room, and it applies to every member of the Day, Doge, and Night Courts...if I catch one of you trying to resurrect the Army of Light from its ashes, joining some sort of fanatical organisation, or once more gathering followers to pursue Ra's Light supremacist goals...I will make sure you will scream on the other side of the Veil like the Archmage is busy screaming right now."

"How bad of a punishment are we talking about?" Eleonora da Riva asked, visibly very interested.

Alexandra sniffed.

"Have you heard of the punishments of Sisyphus, Tantalus, and other prestigious figures sent to the Fields of Punishment? Add all of them together, and then multiply it by ten. Death does not like to be cheated."

The Champion of Innocence...smiled.

"Good, he deserved it."

"You see," Romeo guffawed, "we have something we agree about!"

"Don't get used to it," Eleonora retorted, though the smile never left her face.

"Err..." a lot of heads turned towards Graham Montague, who suddenly sweated under all the attention. "Err, I mean, shouldn't we go? The ceremony is about to begin..."

Alexandra gave the Slytherin Champion a very ironic glance.

"How is it possible you're still alive, Montague?"

"Err...I did my best to survive?"

Yes, yes, she supposed he had.

And incidentally, she owed two Galleons to Fred...or George, the Champion of Death didn't remember which twin she had gambled with.

Unless something very unexpected happened, Montague was going to still be alive at the end of the Fourth Task, against all odds. That may be one of the most surprising things to happen in the last week, and that was saying a lot.

"But unfortunately, you have a point." Alexandra gave a last glare to Longbottom, before turning around and whispering her next command. "Changelina? My Black Knight costume, please."

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

Once again, they were in the Plaza di San Marco, waiting for the Night Court to arrive.

Once again, the Night Queen and the other Champions made a spectacular entrance.

There was suddenly a lot of magical smoke, and then they all Apparated to the right of Malatesti, while the Guards, Artificers, and Warlocks suddenly emerged from the crowd.

Most of them wore costumes that Neville couldn't say he had seen before, but this was mostly normal, as they were certainly the clothes the Champions wanted to use for a ball.

The exception, of course, was Alexandra Potter's. Her costume needed no introduction, not after the defeats she had handed them.

"**I am the Black Knight**...and the Queen of the Night Court," the Champion of Death announced with a smirk.

About two-thirds of the crowd cheered and applauded.

Neville did his best not to grit his teeth. So far, the flimsy hope he had that the Muggles would acknowledge the Night Court as the villains...it hadn't materialised into reality, needless to say.

There were various acclamations, and then the Judges stepped forwards.

"As I'm sure everyone will have understood by now," the Moroccan Judge began, "the end of the Statute of Secrecy and the...massive perturbations it created makes it impossible to continue the Fourth Task."

"Hurrah," Neville heard Ron react behind him. The former Champion of Fate winced, for it was the first time his friend spoke in his presence.

"What a pity," the Dark Queen of Durmstrang said with a carnivorous smile. "There were a few challenges I wanted to try, now that I have finished that embarrassing gondola race."

Wait, it was Lyudmila Romanov herself who had donned this buffoon costume? That was...that was...

Fortunately, the Judges decided to continue and save him from gaping for too long...but the moment of relief didn't last.

"Obviously, the premature end of the Fourth Task forbids us from giving full marks. We can, however, give points to the strategies employed. And we were also able to determine whose Courts broke the rules."

Ah, wait, he didn't mean-

"For a flagrant disregard for the security of the spectators, an abysmal lack of strategy and proper tactics, and accepting the help of terrorists whose sole goal was to destroy Venice...the Day Court receives zero points for this Task."

Graham Montague groaned loudly, and his words were heard by the entire population of Venice next.

"Oh, come on! I participated! Do I not deserve a point? A single point, that's all I ask!"

There were many bursts of laughter, both from Hogwarts students and the spectators.

"No, I'm afraid that is not an option, Champion Montague. There were several members of the Jury who wanted to remove points – at the risk of placing your score and those of your fellow Champions in the negative, I might add – but interrogations of Champion Diggory, Ruspoli, and yourself proved you had nothing to do with the regrettable events of the Timeless Night. Thus you will receive no points for this Task."

Neville tried to keep a good figure, but deep inside, he was grimacing.

It wasn't a priority, and it had been an unreachable dream before the Carnival, but today he was sure he had lost the Tournament. There was no way he was going to catch up after two defeats of an incredible magnitude...

"But that doesn't mean the Jury is inclined to forgive and forget the incredibly disturbing events which led to the Timeless Night itself. Two Champions of the Day Court were killed, and while the demise of Frode Falk can't be blamed upon anyone but himself, the death of Champion Gauthier was beyond pale. For these events and the many rules which were broken, we immediately suspend Champions Longbottom and De Condé from further participation in the Tournament."

And the crowd...the crowd roared its approval.

Merlin's beard...how much did they really screw up to deserve that?

"While we would have loved to determine a victor between the two other Courts," the Judge continued. "A fair assessment has determined this will be impossible without further testing, and so there won't be any victors. All Champions of the Night and Doge Courts will thus be granted fifty points of bonus, including Champion Poliakov, who sacrificed his life for a noble cause."

Yeah, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin had lost all their chances to win this Tournament...

"The Night and Doge Champions will also be allowed to keep all the artefacts, keys, and other rewards they were able to acquire in two days. And they will also have the privilege to open the Great Ball of Venice, which will begin tomorrow evening."

Suddenly, there were far more excited whispers, plus fierce applause from tens of thousands of hands.

Wait, they didn't mean-

"It was supposed to be a surprise for the seventh day," said the female South American Judge who screamed 'Dark Witch' to his senses, "but we can reveal it now: there will be a Great Masked Ball held throughout the entire city tomorrow. We have just received the authorisation from both magical and non-magical authorities of Venice, so that a foundation stone between two separated worlds can be created."

Naturally, a lot of men and women, wizards and witches, loudly manifested their enthusiasm. Ah, wait, they had paid for two weeks, they must be really happy all their money had not been wasted...

"Yes, Champion Malatesti?"

"Will the Tournament continue beyond the Fourth Task?"

"The situation is still...confused, but so far, the Scuola Regina and the magical governments of Venice and Italy are ready to support one more Task before the Summer Solstice. There may be more Tasks, but we can't confirm that more will take place as of today. And before anyone asks...yes, these Tasks will take place in the Venetian Coliseum, with far stricter rules than those you enjoyed for the first three Tasks."

Well, that didn't sound so bad, after all...at least Neville hoped it wasn't so bad. Diplomatic immunity or not, he had almost expected to be arrested at the end of the speech...instead he was merely suspended and received no points.

It could have been worse. Some part of him felt it should have been worse.

"And now I believe, each Champion can explain to the audience you played before. They deserve the truth...and you will give it to them. Champion Longbottom?"

Was it too late to flee?

"Actually, your Honour, I wondered if I could begin first."

\*\*\*\*

"Actually, your Honour, I wondered if I could begin first."

It wasn't easy to say the words.

But it wasn't like it was a difficult choice.

Maybe Longbottom and some in the Day Court were truly willing to admit their mistakes and acknowledge out loud their stupidity.

And maybe they were not.

It was way better to speak first.

"By all means, Champion Potter."

"Thank you, your Honour."

Alexandra then teleported above the Basilica's entrance, and cast a Sonorous upon her throat. Technically speaking, she really didn't need to use it, but it was better not to use too much of the power of Death...that way no one would be able to say she had magically compelled the spectators.

"Life is something to be cherished." The young witch began, trying to forget how crowded it was and how many spectators that represented. It looked like the entire city of Venice had come to see the end of the Fourth Task.

"I know it must be strange for you to hear. No doubt you've heard the rumours. The followers of Ra did not all perish during the last battle. And they were all quite willing to shout I was the Champion of Death."

There were, assuredly, plenty of nods and whispers in the crowd below.

"In that respect, they haven't lied. I am Alexandra Potter. I am the current Champion of Death. And I have sent to my Goddess far too many of the souls who pretended to serve the Light."

There was a great deal of fear spreading after that. Good, there were more intelligent than most wizards in the crowd.

"But what they have perhaps failed to mention is that the Light is not synonymous with Good or any positive qualities. The Light they worshipped was based on genocide, extermination, tyranny and blind obedience. The Light of the Archmage would have condemned all of us to stagnation and ignorance, all men and women forced to crawl before the throne of the old fossil."

Alexandra heard the snort of amusement from the Dark Queen, of course...well, she owed her that, no matter how inaccurate it had proven.

"I didn't always know there was a magical society which existed separated from the one you are all familiar with, you know. I only discovered it when I was ten. In many ways, you could say that I did face my own Statute-breaking revelation on a personal level four years ago. It was only the first revelation of many that waited for me. I rode flying brooms at sunset. I began to cast ridiculously complicated and seemingly-pointless magics with a wand. I donned robes which felt like they belonged to some seventeenth or eighteenth century fashion. I fought monsters, I lost to some, and I survived more battles than I bothered to count."

And Alexandra couldn't say she regretted it anymore.

Had there been moments when she wished she could turn the clocks back and forget everything magical had entered her life.

Yes, there had been instances.

But the longer she stayed in the magical world...the longer it had been her world, no longer the 'magical' or the 'Wizarding World', or any other name you might want to give it.

"I know some of you dream the destruction of the Statute will instantly make everything better. Regrettably, I can't lie and say to you it will be a magical utopia. When the Archmage of Light and his fanatics created the Statute, they didn't destroy merely the memories of that time, they also damaged magic itself. In the centuries since, the world changed recognition, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. And the worlds which should never have been separated changed and adapted. Industry, not Guild Artisans. Magical wards, not technology. Aircraft, not magical carpets."

In many ways, one could easily say the non-magical world has benefitted from it more than the magical one. They still had the fierce spirit of competitiveness, while the smaller magical community wasn't as innovative, if one didn't count the Exchequer.

"That's why I am not naive enough to think merging the two worlds back together will be easy. To give one example, your science is rightfully proud of the advances which made blood donation possible. But I can honestly tell you it is going to horrify plenty of wizards and witches. Blood Magic is heavily regulated, for any practitioner with evil intentions can kill or torture you with enough of your blood in his or her possession."

And if she listed other examples, they might still be here for ten more days.

"Yet the Statute is gone, and with each day, it is clear there will be no return possible. I think we can make it work. We lived among you during this Carnival. Yes, we had masks, and we dressed in amusing costumes, presented an outrageous and comical battle on the quays of the fish market. But weren't you entertained?"

Many voices shouted approval...far many more than she had hoped for, to be honest.

"I became the Night Queen because I won the previous Task of this inter-school competition," Alexandra admitted. "But I donned the costume of the Black Knight by choice."

This had been her decision, and she didn't regret it. There were many things she would try to change if the Fourth Task was cast back in time...but not that.

"The days ahead won't be simple, once the dreams of the Masked Ball are behind us. Yet there must be dreams, otherwise we won't know what to strive for. There must be hope in life, otherwise we will all drink our sorrows until death is a relief. There must be marvels, otherwise where will be the motivation to invent new great spells and architectural wonders? For this and many other reasons, my fellow Champions and I have decided not to claim the rights of Conquest we could have. We will return the treasures of Alexander of Macedon, my long-distant magical ancestor, to the two worlds...which will be one for all the futures to come."

The men and women began to shout.

It took a loud clearing of her throat to bring back some...relative silence.

"I don't know where we will build this museum, assuming we will present it as a museum and not some other historical representation. I don't know where we will build it either. But I hope that it will be the first step of many which will lead to the walls of the Statute being torn down and realised, in time, for the folly they were. For too many years, one world did live without magic, and the other failed to recognise what a privilege it was to enjoy it. We will attempt to heal the wounds of war and isolation. And...I will do my utmost to end the Wars of the Light and the Dark."

The answer from the spectators...it was like a thunder of cheers and applause.

"BLACK KNIGHT! BLACK KNIGHT!"

"ALEXANDRA POTTER!"

"WE WANT THE BLACK KNIGHT FOR OUR QUEEN!"

They were...supporting her? They knew...and...maybe...maybe the King of the Exchequer had been more right than everyone gave him credit for...

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

"That was a remarkable entrance into the world of politics, Lady Potter."

Alexandra tried very hard not to blush at Maharaja Raja Wodeyar X's praise.

"Well, it wasn't like I had much of a choice. Politics would have come for me no matter what I did, after the duel on Westminster Bridge. I felt it was best to...take the initiative, so to say."

"An extremely wise decision," the Ruler of Magical Mysore commented. "I fear some of the wizards I call my neighbours that were born fifty years before you utterly failed to understand this in the last days."

Alexandra took a glance at the extravagant costume of green and gold of the ICW Delegate before speaking once more.

"Is it going to be that bad?" she asked.

"That depends entirely on what aspect you're focusing on, Lady Potter," the Maharaja answered while searching for several fruits, part of the buffet House Sforza had assembled in this dining room. "If the most important matter is ending the conflict between Light and Dark, then I think you will have little difficulties establishing some treaties and general diplomatic agreements. Many of my neighbours called these endless conflicts 'the Cycle of Destruction' or something similar. Now that the two Avatars are gone...their absence will not be that mourned."

That was...well, good news. Alexandra wasn't going to deny it.

On the other hand, that the ruler of Mysore had chosen to begin with the Light-Dark feud and reassure her on that point hinted things were quite more problematic for the next big problem they all faced.

"And the end of the Statute?"

Raja Wodeyar X grimaced.

"I am not going to lie, Sword of Death, it is going to be...complicated. This is not helped by the fact that on our side of the Statute, there are many nations that are what Europeans took pleasure in calling 'princely states.' Though it doesn't do our magical societies justice, of course."

"Of course," Alexandra repeated. "Meanwhile on the non-magical side, India achieved unification years ago...well, unification east of the Indus and for the majority of the peninsula, I think."

Unfortunately, while she knew far more about India than she had been told before her fourteenth birthday, Alexandra was ready to admit that all this newly acquired knowledge didn't amount to much.

"You have...what, three hundred 'princely states' as far as the frontiers of the non-magical Republic of India are concerned?"

"It is closer to four hundred, though only fifty or sixty have enough to weigh on future negotiations with our non-magical cousins of India."

Yes, that was a position of weakness, all right.

And she noted every part of that conversation had been about India, not Pakistan...

Alexandra nonetheless raised an ironic eyebrow.

"While I'm sure my voice will be heard, won't there be concerns I was born and raised in Britain? On the magical side of the Statute, this isn't evidently a problem, for London and Fudge's predecessors never colonised the Indian Peninsula."

They already had difficulties making a stable government system at home. At least someone long ago had figured out that trying to conquer the Indian magical communities was going to end in disaster very, very fast.

"There will always be concerns to some degree," the Maharaja replied. "But I think your youth, your powers, and your recent exploits, not to mention your love for animals, will speak far better than many other narrow-minded politicians and will provide a...fresh view of the situation, along with some incentives for peaceful solutions to be found."

"Hmm...very well, I will see what I can do during my free time." The Champion of the Morrigan sighed. "Under the condition all parties discuss it in a peaceful manner, at least. If violence breaks out, I am not going to tolerate the...foolish deeds of certain parties."

"Of course," Raja Wodeyar approved vigorously. "While I don't know everything about your duties, Sword of Death, I am not going to invite you to dishonourable talks while the situation outside the cities unravel. I am not one of those fools of the region...I think the non-magical Europeans call it the Middle East, is it?"

It was a triumph of will not to scowl this time.

The Ravenclaw Champion had not been naive enough to believe the end of the Statute would give her some god-like popularity among the non-magical population. That it did on British soil and now for Venice was good news, oh yes. And it was already more than she expected. When Lucrezia Sforza had given her a first quick sum-up of what she had missed, the goal had been more to convince the non-magical population to take a 'wait and see' approach.

And in many European countries, it looked like the magical were going to achieve far more than that.

But in some places, the most pessimistic scenarios hadn't been pessimistic *enough*.

"I was told some of them called me 'the Great Female Satan'." The Champion of the Morrigan sniffed disdainfully. "In addition to some other names I won't repeat here."

"They are in a full panic. And people, whether they are able to wield the gift of magic or not...are noted to do extremely unwise things when they are panicking."

At least the situation was better in Egypt. Apparently, participating in the desperate fight against a monster called 'Apophis' had bought her a lot of good will there, though the nation's situation was...fraught with peril.

Lyudmila Romanov and her patron were going to have fun for the next few decades, the young green-eyed witch reflected. The world was really chaotic, and it wasn't about to be very orderly any time soon, no matter what she did.

"That was...illuminating. But..." Alexandra looked at her watch and breathed out. "I'm afraid I must leave. I have another important meeting, and I was advised to go there discreetly."

"Of course, Sword of Death, thank you for the audience."

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

It was in her costume of 'Queen of Light' that Alexandra entered the church of Santa Maria della Salute, and no one was the wiser for it.

Well, no one but the wizards of the Exchequer guarding the entrance, hiding under very elaborate illusions. They verified Alexandra was exactly who she pretended to be with several highly difficult spells before allowing her to progress further.

Therefore it was only with thirty seconds of advance the black-haired student arrived before the altar.

It brought a lot of souvenirs.

In many ways, it looked like an eternity had passed since the Basilisk Slayer had visited the edifice.

But in the real world, it had only lasted a few days.

There was...everything had changed.

Everything had changed, up to the identity of the person who wanted to speak with her here.

The church itself had not changed at all.

And yet...the power of Water and Fire could be sensed, no matter how hard you tried not to hear them.

The stones of Santa Maria della Salute were bathed in that pool of magic.

Like everything else in Venice, it was now imbued with magic that had not been common for centuries.

It was beautiful. It was seducing. It was not for her.

This thought had just crossed her mind when something felt cold against her skin...and just like that, the Queen of the Exchequer was behind her.

"A Great Masked Ball. Really?"

"Politics," Morgane Rys'Ygraine of Avalon told her drily.

Alexandra removed her light-themed mask and gave a very sarcastic expression to the ancient female vampire.

"So many Ministers of Magic have announced support for your cause I've honestly lost count in the last three hours."

"You misunderstand, Alexandra. When I spoke of politics...I spoke of factions *within the Exchequer*."

Ah. That was...not good.

"I suppose it has to do with the...incomplete victory that was just won, and the fact it made your organisation leaderless."

"A quite astute summary of the situation," Morgane replied. "Yes, it is exactly that. There was dire need to fix new ambitious objectives and to ensure some points were heard loud and clear."

This wasn't exactly reassuring. With a lot of the Army of Light butchered, the world hadn't exactly a lot of wizards and witches who could counter a Knight of the Exchequer if one decided to go rogue.

One could only hope the Queen was indeed going to be able to replace the King in every way which mattered...

"How will things change, then?" Alexandra asked after a moment. "From the hints you gave me, I deduced you wanted the Apprenticeship Ceremony to officially take place the day after the Summer Solstice. Was I wrong?"

"No, you were not." The sworn enemy of the Knights of the Round of Table answered. "But the circumstances have forced some alterations in your planning. First off, I believe you need as fast as possible to learn the basics of Enchanting."

That...that she had totally not expected, but it was not unwelcome.

"I will need a teacher, though."

"Your mother will be in charge of that part of your education."

At the risk of repeating herself...she had really not expected that.

But she could definitely live with it.

"You will continue your Potion studies with Horace Slughorn," the Queen of the Exchequer continued. "In the meantime, you will learn two new Runic languages, and master them sufficiently to have a large repertoire of evocations and Galdr analogues. I leave the choice of the Runes to you, but the effort required is non-negotiable."

That was...strange. Since she had taken the elective, Alexandra was honest enough to admit she had gotten excellent grades with it, both at Hogwarts and the Scuola Regina. What her future Mistress required, however, was way beyond any academic threshold used by elite magical schools. Mordor's clouds, the Ravenclaw witch didn't know if some veteran Curse-Breakers knew as many Runic scripts before they reached thirty!

But looking at the cold vampiric eyes, it was clear it wasn't a joke.

"I will do it. I suppose I will take some advice from my fellow Champions before selecting the Runes in question, though."

"By all means." The Queen had not finished her instructions, alas, no matter how pleasant the tone. "And while you are not officially my Apprentice, three times per week, I will take between two and four hours of your afternoons to teach you personally. Headmistress Sforza and all your Professors have been warned of this."

Goodbye free time, it was so nice knowing you...still, she should be able to squeeze some hours for her friends, and of course spend some resting time with Susan...

"What are you going to teach me?"

"Many things. The principal goal for these months is assuredly to increase your control levels over your own magic. You have more power than many Lady-level witches, Alexandra, but you are incredibly wasteful with it. It is not your fault, your magical core has grown far too tremendously for any other outcome to be possible...but now it must be corrected."

"I am not going to argue with that."

"Good. I will also teach you the basics of an art you have seen the terrible glory of during your quest...I speak of course, of Battle-Transfiguration."

The Basilisk Slayer was a bit skeptical...Alexandra felt she had every right to be, after watching Ra and Osiris duel to the death with conjured animals and deathly weapons conjured from the void by their sheer imagination and magical skills.

"Isn't it an art extremely exhausting, physically and magically?"

"Thus the absolute need to better control your magic, Alexandra."

A groan escaped her lips.

"Now let's speak of the 'Great Masked Ball', as you so aptly called it...I think it will be an excellent lesson for you...one which will force you to wade onto a path where many women have lost themselves: politics."

Alexandra felt that a couple of seconds ago, she truly had not groaned loudly enough...

**Author's note**: The Venice Arc will finish next chapter, chapter 111, whose provisional title is *The Masked Ball*.

The Tournament is not over. And now with the Statute over, the audience is really the whole world...

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