**Chapter 84**

**Goodbye Hogwarts**

**29 October 1994, Hogwarts Express, Scotland**

Each Champion having placed trunks and other possessions at least one hour ahead of schedule, their last minutes on the soil of Scotland were more celebrations and acclaims at Hogsmeade Station than a ‘mere goodbye’. The whole school – and a minority of Hogsmeade inhabitants – seemed to have chosen today to say farewell. Fred and George had taken the opportunity to fire more fireworks and sell Butterbeer to a lot of students, Luna had enchanted massive fluffy mascots, and other contributions like banners, T-shirts, charmed animals, and so on.

The result was an extremely spectacular parade of all the colours of the Hogwarts’ four Houses. It was also a very loud parade, and Alexandra took several seconds to savour the silence once the Hogwarts Express left the crowds behind them and the red-gold locomotive began a slow acceleration southwards.

This moment of rest acknowledged and spent, all the boys and girls present could then manifest their approval when looking at the arrangements prepared for them in the Hogwarts Express.

“Damn,” Eurig Cadwallader of Hufflepuff was the first to comment, “Professor Dumbledore has really gone all-out modifying the Express.”

“The Space-Expansion Charms are Professor Flitwick’s specialty,” Morag immediately disagreed next to her before allowing herself to fall in a comfy armchair. “And these Transfigurations are likely Professor McGonagall’s work...”

“Yes,” the green-eyed Ravenclaw said while imitating her friend. “But whoever did it, he or she did very good work.”

If one judged only by this railway car, it was incredibly difficult to believe this was the same train they had used two months ago from London to Hogsmeade. All the compartment dividers and many elements of decorations had been removed, so that this particular location became an enormous ‘common room’ where more than thirty boys and girls could have been introduced with ease. Given that they were only twenty for this travel, there was a lot of space left.

Armchairs, four couches, three large rectangular tables, a fake chimney...even for Professors, this must have been an effort of a few days to cast and then stabilise to make sure it would last the year. The decorative items on the walls weren’t as pleasant to look at; there were only so many times you could replicate the big ‘H’ of their school coat of arms before it became boring to glance at.

“And so our journey towards adventure and danger begins,” Morag said dramatically before bursting into giggles.

“See Hermione?” Alexandra yawned. “Not ten minutes of Hogwarts Express, and our dear friend has stopped being serious. We’re all going to be crazy by the time we arrive to Venetia.”

Of course the busy-haired Ravenclaw didn’t answer. She had already opened a voluminous book.

“Should we be worried for this year?” Morag wondered with a fearful expression too exaggerated to be true. “The Scuola Regina is said to have a massive library, our poor Hermione might starve between two shelves...”

“Err...sure,” Tamsin Applebee coughed. “Do you know where Cedric has gone? I swear he was just behind us...”

“I think he went to the bedroom compartments with Cho,” Morag chuckled evilly.

“Oh,” the older Hufflepuff reddened. “Oh. Isn’t it going to cause...problems with the teachers when they come back for the meeting in an hour?”

Alexandra looked at the badger in amusement.

“We are Champions now, Tamsin. In less than a week, Cedric will be among the four students of Hogwarts who will risk their lives in the Tournament. *Whatever* Cedric and Cho are busy doing...well, let’s just say I hope they’re enjoying it. It has little chance to be illegal, and it is fine to have fun before the Tournament officially starts.”

“I would have thought you would insist to study and re-study until tomorrow.” Blaise intervened behind her. Turning her head, she saw Malcolm Preece and Roger Davies had opened a set of modified Tarot cards and were preparing a game.

“Study until the last minute? Why would I do that?” Alexandra asked honestly baffled.

“You did it for the theory exam of Transfiguration last June,” Morag reminded her.

“Yes...but it was an exam.” The Champion of the Morrigan replied slowly. “This is an interschool competition. It’s completely different. Unless I have been Obliviated, I don’t think there was much need to run during our end-of-the-year exams. On the other hand, being in the beast health of our lives will be primordial here.”

“One might almost wonder,” a voice she had every reason to be displeased hearing, “if you don’t know what exactly await us in this Tournament...and that you have chosen not to reveal it, of course.”

“Warrington,” the Basilisk-Slayer spoke coldly and glared at the blonde-haired boy at the other end of the ‘common room’, taking note of the silence which had suddenly extinguished every conversation. “Your insinuations, as always, are so transparent they are unworthy of Salazar’s House. If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, close your mouth and stop contaminating this room with your stupidity.”

There might have been a time where she was more polite. But since the adult wizard – he had celebrated his seventeenth birthday a couple of months ago – was a Death Eater and his relatives were ‘Imperiused’ in the last war, there was no need to be tolerant.

“Very well.” The boy snarled back. “The Black Widow is your guardian, and she’s Venetian. No doubt she told you everything she was able to learn before she killed her seventh husband. Or was it her eighth?”

“It was the seventh...I think.” Alexandra replied in a boring tone. After the number of people she had killed in duel, the Potter Heiress didn’t think she had the right to cast stones at her guardian. “And I have to say, your logic is extremely flawed. You are English. Does the Headmaster is confiding to you every secret he’s coming across every week-end? Magical Venetia has a population of over forty thousand, why should my guardian be aware of every secret happening at the Scuola Regina or near it?”

Cassius Warrington’s rage was a very satisfying shade of red and violet. A pity he still was all too aware of what would happen to him if he drew his wand in anger.

“What I know,” the wielder of Fragarach concluded, “is the sum of the clues which have filtered to everyone so far, and it’s not much. It was sufficient however to study assiduously and train magically a lot.”

“And for those of us who have little reason so far to make deep researches in some dusty libraries?” Tamsin asked with sad puppy eyes.

Alexandra hesitated...Warrington and Longbottom were not even bothering to pretend they weren’t listening to this conversation after all, and she didn’t trust them at all. The only one of the four she reasonably trusted to be fair-play was Diggory, and he wasn’t present.

But honestly, she didn’t know what the First Trial was going to be, so it wasn’t like her words were going to be of a massive help, unless they had spies in the Tournament’s organisation teams.

“The trials of this inter-school competition are near-guaranteed to take place in the massive Coliseum the Venetians built in record time. It’s entirely possible one or two ‘quests’ will involve other locations if the local infrastructure is insufficient, but the First and Seventh Tasks are going to be played there. Since the ICW has confirmed there will be sixty thousand tickets and several thousand students invited, this arena is undoubtedly huge, maybe eighty thousand spectators. Logically, this size will allow it to tolerate the weight and the sheer aggressiveness of XXXXX-class magical creatures.”

“This is speculation,” Angelina Johnson said.

The Ravenclaw Champion smirked.

“Anything below three ‘X’s is just meat-fodder which won’t be able to stop an average wizard or witch. A XXXX-class being can provide a challenge...provided there is only a single Champion opposed to him or her. And if multiple Champions are thrown together into the arena, it will be a XXXXX opponent.”

The Basilisk-Slayer called a House Elf like yesterday’s instructions had explained them to and asked for a glass of apple juice.

“Not everyone is a battle-maniac like you, Potter,” it stood to reason that Leo Black couldn’t stop his remarks, even under pain of death...

“The Tri-Wizard was a substitute for war in the old times,” the survivor of several large-scale battles continued like she had not heard him, which would undoubtedly hurt his large ego for the next minutes. “This may not have been among the reasons professed for its return. The Venetians and all other competitors will swear they do not want a return of the old scenes of slaughter which occurred before the Statute was enforced. Some of them might even believe it.”

Alexandra took the time to bare her teeth and let her eyes shine harder in a minimal transfiguration she was rather proud of.

“But it is not a game. There are going to be deaths. When you are in the antechamber of the Tournament, steel yourself and prepare to kill, because I assure you several of the other school’s Champions will have no reluctance slaying you.”

The House Elf arrived and gave her the apple juice. The service was really impeccable, and she told so to the ‘butler’.

“You don’t scare us, Potter.” Apparently what she had said had entered one ear of Black’s, and come out immediately by the other. It was a real pity the son of the unlamented Sirius Black wasn’t the Gryffindor Champion for the First Task...

“My goal wasn’t to make you afraid, Black,” Alexandra rose from her armchair to see what sort of card game Blaise Zabini and the others were playing. “If I did, believe me, you wouldn’t be able to sleep soundly for the rest of the year.”

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Dinner in the Hogwarts Express was a far more small-time affair than it was at Hogwarts. For one, the Professors present were eating in their own railway car, and for two, there weren’t any House separations, meaning they could sit with whoever they wanted and not receive glares from hundreds of eyes.

It was really a normal affair...and Alexandra was surprised how weird it was for her friends and she. The more she thought about it, the more the Morrigan’s Champion realised how many bad habits Hogwarts was giving to its students.

“Are you sure giving so much information was wise?” Roger Davies asked once they had finished the delicious soup prepared by the Hogwarts House Elves – and yes, before anyone wondered, an entire part of the train had been temporarily converted into a kitchen by and for them.

“Like I said before making a few sum-ups about our situation,” the green-eyed witch told the older boy, “I haven’t said anything that they shouldn’t have discovered by now.”

The fact that obviously some had not bothered searching was not a good sign. It wasn’t like the revelations were difficult to find or long to analyse. To name the most obvious example, more than two-thirds of the previous Tri-Wizard Tournaments had begun with Champions facing dangerous magical creatures.

“We know,” Susan answered quickly. “It’s just that...Black, Weasley, Warrington...they insult you, they try to dirty your reputation, and they still try to use your knowledge wherever it is convenient.”

Her girlfriend brought many good points. Of course, it wasn’t exactly like she had never thought about it before. There was a reason why around their table every Ravenclaw – save Cho who was at Cedric’s table – had cast several Charms preventing potential hostiles from spying them.

“And I do not change my position,” Alexandra smirked. “And honestly, it is still possible one or two Champions are going to hear my words and arrive to the wrong conclusions.”

“Wrong conclusions?”

“The trials of the old tri-Wizard Tournament in general authorised frontal assaults against magical creatures,” the Ravenclaw witch commented. “But except occasions when the Tournament was held at Durmstrang, our predecessors were rarely demanded to attack straight-on a Cockatrice or another dangerous XXXXX-class beast. Nine times out of ten, the goal is to recover a clue for the next trial; it isn’t to try to slay something ten times bigger than you are.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Roger grudgingly admitted. “Any ideas what the most likely possibilities are?”

Alexandra exchanged a look with Hermione.

“No. That’s the problem with the Coliseum and the Scuola Regina as a whole. The Headmistress is likely the wealthiest witch of Venetia, which means the budget won’t be a limiting factor for the magical creatures. And while in other circumstances the arena size would be a constraint too, here it doesn’t apply.”

The Coliseum might be too big for something the size of Nidhögg...but fortunately or unfortunately, the black dragon trapped inside Hogwarts was the apex predator of all super-predators. It would be different if the trial’s animals were forced to stay inside the Coliseum for a few weeks, but for one or two hours, they wouldn’t grow tired too much of the limited space.

“The First Task is always about adaptation.” Morag said in a subdued voice.

“Exactly,” Alexandra said while playing with her silver fork. “Roger, do you mind keeping an eye on Hooper? I don’t like how much time he spends with Longbottom, Black, and Weasley.” The Ravenclaw teenager might be imagining things, but it had not escaped Angelina Johnson was dining with the Hufflepuffs.

“I can,” the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain replied seriously. “You want him to survive as long as possible.”

It was not a question, and he wasn’t wrong.

“Ideally, I want everyone to survive...save Warrington, Montague, and Nott.” The first two were marked Death Eaters, and the third was so bigoted and cruel letting him live longer than necessary was just asking for trouble. “But yes, I would prefer Geoffrey remains the Gryffindor Champion for several Tournament Trials.”

“You don’t think Longbottom would fare better than he when it comes to magical creatures?”

“Oh, I do,” the winner of the Hogwarts Preliminaries nodded. “But the minds behind the Tournament aren’t going to throw us against magical creatures every Saturday. And should a judge or another party make the second or third trial about...Potions...what would happen, in your opinion?”

Roger and Hermione grimaced immediately, and Morag and Susan weren’t far behind.

“You have a point,” the older Ravenclaw of the table shook his head. “But I have to signal you all Gryffindors have major problems brewing Potions without melting the cauldron in the process.”

“Yeah,” Morag intervened, “but on a Snape’s scale from one to ten, Hooper is barely at two while the Boy-Who-Lived is at eleven...”

**30 October 1994, Hogwarts Express**

Alexandra had decided to sleep nine full hours while the Hogwarts Express left Britain and continued the long journey across Europe. It was very much not her nightly schedule anymore, but there were ‘attenuating circumstances’ for this move. She had to test the beds of the Hogwarts Express, for curiosity’s sake. As in a few hours she was going to meet other Champions, all potentially hostile, Death’s Champion had to be in top physical and mental shape. It wouldn’t do to let them believe she was weak and exhausted. Many were already not going to take her seriously because she was three or four younger than them, no need to accumulate the bad points.

And last but not least, while she had nocturnal vision, there really wasn’t anything interesting to do. The Potter Heiress was finally able to cast Silencio, if not masterfully, and training her skills would require other wizards awake than her. Reading? She had finished two history books, and the parts of the ‘Nidhögg Library’ she wanted to read were going to have to wait she could read the Old English-Latin hybrid they were written in. Watching the landscape defile under her eyes? Too boring.

In ten sentences like in one, it was more ‘productive’ to sleep than to remain in the ‘Hogwarts’ Express common room’...and clearly there was no bath prepared for a midnight relaxation.

What a shame.

Despite this, nine hours of recharging witch and Hydra’s batteries later, Alexandra was still the first Champion to abandon the ‘bedroom’ which had been given to her and go take her breakfast.

Since it was dawn and there was a mountainous landscape to admire, the Champion of House Ravenclaw didn’t mind too much.

Of course, the moment she thought about that, the Hogwarts Express went into a tunnel, and didn’t come out for ten good minutes. Once again, it was good to be reminded the world loved irony.

A quick breakfast later, the black-haired teenager sat in one of the blue armchairs and began to read one of the History books relating the history of the Tri-Wizard Tournament for the sixteenth century. It was very interesting. Bloody and worthy of horror tales, but interesting nonetheless.

The discreet noise of footsteps made her rise her head and stop reading for a few seconds.

“You can come in, Longbottom. The House Elves are ready to serve you, if breakfast is why you’ve come for.”

Whatever few powers Fate gave his Champion, they didn’t appear to include an ability to be extra-active at dawn. The black-haired Gryffindor looked like he needed a lot of coffee or something equally energetic to emerge from his torpor.

“I...I will do that. What are you reading?”

“*The* *Tri-Wizard Tournament and the Seventeenth Century, Heroes and Politics*,” Alexandra answered absently returning to assimilating the content of the pages.

“This isn’t a book available in the Hogwarts Library.” The Potter Heiress had to give him a point for searching the books about the old Tournament and learning the titles.

“No. Several editions were confiscated decades ago because they presented the London Ministry in a bad light. That’s why I’m forced to read the Italian translation.”

Though her guardian approved everything which allowed her to improve her barely fluent Italian and its cousin the Venetian dialect, Alexandra would have preferred reading it in good English. Alas, she had not been given the choice, since the original English book was nowhere to be sold.

“You speak Italian?”

“It’s a work in progress,” the Ravenclaw witch replied evasively. “I think it’s going to be extremely useful this year. You don’t?”

“Two Translation Potions can’t be used the same season, and I had already used one for French this summer,” the future Lord Longbottom admitted, not looking proud of himself.

The Champion of House Ravenclaw clicked her tongue, but remained silent. One more proof the Light was really not thinking ahead. If they had two brain cells, they would have begun to teach him foreign languages the moment he was a potential claimant. French was the European diplomatic language of the Wizarding World, what were the supporters of the Order of the Phoenix supposed to do if they couldn’t understand their own allies?

“I suppose you’re speaking French.”

“I’ve learnt French, yes.” And she was making good progress in Latin – for the spells and some archive reading. Gaelic and several old dialects of the Isles were also in her skill set. And her studies in the field of Hieroglyphs had given her the basics of the ancient Egyptian language.

“You shouldn’t speak with this Black Witch, Neville.”

Goodbye the hope of a relatively friendly conversation with one Gryffindor. Ronald Weasley has arrived.

Alexandra looked up from the pages of her book...and couldn’t help but chuckle, for all her self-control.

“Something funny, Dark Witch?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, Weasley.” Her chest had to be one step away from a crisis of laughter. “By everything that’s holy and sacred in this world, *what are you wearing*?”

The red-haired boy had chosen to arrive this morning wearing...something...a robe...the words failed her. It was vaguely dark brown, unless it was a sort of ugly mauve. It looked completely old-fashioned, however. The Potter Heiress was not a dress-maker, but she could tell that much. And by old, she was ready to bet on something like ‘more than three centuries old’.

“This is one of the official robes we were told to bring for the Tournament!” The Gryffindor hotly retorted. “I respect the rules, unlike some!”

This...this was an official robe? He intended to wear something like that at an official ceremony?

Alexandra was proud of finding funny tirades and answers to everything. But here she was struck dumb. Her ears had to be mistaken. The Hydra in her had to suffer from something and screw with her senses.

Her brain was struck down. The Basilisk-Slayer was honestly...speechless.

Then she heard Morag open the door behind her...and her Irish friend began to laugh hysterically when she saw what Weasley had donned instead of normal robes.

“Weasley,” summoning enough strength in her voice to not collapse in giggles took a godly effort. “If you try to go to an official ceremony dressed like this, I will personally kill you.”

“Come on Alex...”Morag managed to articulate between two giggles. “Isn’t he dashing and noble?”

This was too much and she began to laugh hysterically with the other Champions who had arrived for breakfast. It would take them fifteen minutes – and Ron Weasley running back to the place he had packed his possessions – to calm themselves.

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

Dumbledore’s face was very funny when the Hogwarts Express finally stopped. Their poor Headmaster looked like a cat had devoured his tongue.

To be fair – not that she particularly wanted to, of course – there was reason to be frustrated.

The train station around them was far bigger and more beautiful than Hogsmeade. Even turning her head once, Alexandra could see ten marble statues of Hermes, Greek God of Travellers...unless it was the Roman God Mercury, it was always difficult to notice the differences between two.

Whereas the Scottish castle had done the very minimum for their station, minimum meaning one quay, a single railway, and a large building to store the Hogwarts Express when it was in use, the Venetians had decided to build big. There were five railways, two yellow trains, and the infrastructure to support them was not insignificant. Assuredly it wasn’t King’s Cross, but it wasn’t the ‘middle of nowhere’ that was Hogsmeade.

“Except the red carpet, everything is here,” Morag whispered as they left the Hogwarts Express in music, a large orchestra playing to welcome them.

“Quite right,” the green-eyed girl had to admit, it was already impressive. Not the crowd, although Alexandra knew Hogsmeade had not half that population. “That’s a very nice town they have here.”

The settlement looked like one of these medieval villages of old...except with some nice modern houses here and there, powerful magical lights of blue, red, and green. The main street appeared to be linear, but the lesser ones were sinuous and strangely welcoming.

And then there were the people. The Ravenclaws had known the Venetian Republic was far more tolerant than the British Ministry, but it was really an eye-opened to see a few centaurs in the crowd, along with several species which were definitely not human.

The next minutes...were spent waiting. The town authorities had prepared speeches to greet them. This was both reassuring...and very boring.

At least it gave them the opportunity to get rid of their uniform’s cloaks. Seriously, their oh-so-wise Headmaster had insisted they wore the full uniform of the school for the event, but had he really thought about how warm it was? Alexandra didn’t know if it was normal weather for this part of Italy or a consequence of the land being meteorologically-altered by wizards and watches, but it was far, far warmer than October in Scotland.

“I don’t see any Coliseum,” Hermione noted.

“I don’t see the school either,” the Potter Heiress replied to her friend. “Don’t worry, the road across the village looks like it’s climbing before it is going behind this promontory.”

It still took more than twenty minutes before they were allowed to escape the exchange of amicabilities and politician shenanigans. Then it was walking between two columns of people acclaiming them.

“There are no goblins,” Morag pointed out after a few minutes.

“Yes,” the Basilisk-Slayer could have pointed out there weren’t any Leprechauns either, but it would have been hypocritical: they rarely left Ireland. “I knew the banking services were dominated by humans, not goblins, but it looks like it goes deeper than that.”

Perhaps the Battle of Brise-Roc had not just been a free atrocity to accompany the death of Flamel as she had believed. Did the Exchequer plan to destroy the economic stranglehold of Gringotts and other goblin institutions this year?

“But while there aren’t goblins,” Alexandra continued, “it seems they have pretty much accepted everyone else.”

Many people hid under a human shell, but it was extremely difficult to trick a Hydra’s senses. And as a result...well, there were a lot of skinchangers in the crowd. Alexandra couldn’t exactly tell the exact names without stopping in front of each being, but she was rather sure there were were-birds, were-felines, were-reptiles, and of course, werewolves and wererats.

All of these considerations were forgotten as they left the last manors and medieval habitations and suddenly a large valley seemed to materialise out of nowhere before them.

A cascade of magic brushed against her skin, and the Morrigan’s Champion knew instinctively they had been accepted by the outer wards of the Scuola Regina.

It wasn’t like at Hogwarts. It was far more...unrestrained, raw magic.

The ambient power was a secondary concern to the sight, however.

Water and earth. This was Alexandra’s first thought.

Unlike the Hogwarts valley, the magical population had not left their equivalent of the Black Lake on one side and the land on the other.

No, they had sculpted...the word was very appropriate somehow....the land of the valley so that the two elements coexisted and sublimed each other. There had to be hundreds of canals here – which weren’t surprising for Venice – but the myriad of fountains, of aquatic labyrinths, and the uncountable flower fields were.

It was a spectacle of colours, as classical white marble managed to exalt blue-sapphire stones and sand walls created artificial cascades over green ponds.

Not everything was purely for the state of esthetical purposes: in the middle of the decorations, some fields looked definitely like they were used for food harvesting.

And at the end of this valley that Neptune and Ceres might have blessed with their powers, a large castle awaited.

It wasn’t anything like Hogwarts. This construction had never served as a fortress or any military installation – if the canals and all the decorations didn’t make that clear before. No, the Scuola Regina – for what else it could be? – was a white-stoned castle, but something one imagined when thinking about the Renaissance style.

It was shaped like a ‘U’, with them facing the base of it at the moment, and the long ‘wings’ of the ‘U’ embracing canals and flowers on each side of the valley.

“Wow,” the exclamation escaped Morag’s lips before hers. “Well, this is...”

“Yes, the sight alone was worth the journey.”

For once, differences between Hogwarts Houses as all the Champions felt the pull of magic and splendour. There was little to say before such magnificence and beauty.

“They completely remodelled the valley with magic,” Hermione whispered in awe.

“They did more than that,” Alexandra murmured back, “have you seen the statue of Poseidon in the middle of the blue fountains?”

The Greek God of the Sea – unless it was its Roman aspect of Neptune – was represented driving a gigantic chariot towed by elegant dolphins, and the trident he carried was a fountain in its own right.

“Didn’t Lyre tell us Versailles was imagined at a time where the Statute of Secrecy was not yet enforced?”

“Yes, she did,” and they may have found one of the sources of inspiration which had led to it. “There were certainly many paintings and artworks dedicated to it.”

Neptune-Poseidon was far from the only sculpture to be used both as a fountain and an ornamental sculpture, obviously. There were hundreds of them, the majority of them smaller, but still. There were of all the colours, red, grey, black, blue, green, rose, ochre, beige, purple...and the Venetians had succeeded in the effort to all make them integrated in the spectacle of elegance and nature harmony.

“Champions, the gondolas are awaiting you.”

“Maybe it isn’t totally unlike Hogwarts after all...”

Alexandra chuckled for once at Black’s muttering.

It was true...and false. Yes, the travel over a surface of water was not-so-strangely the same invitation Hogwarts gave its new students. But this one, they didn’t do it at night – and the Champion could appreciate the irony – it was done under a cloudless blue sky and a radiant sun.

But they did not do in mere ‘boats’. The gondolas they all mounted aboard were works of art by themselves. Gold, ebony, silver had been fused magically to give them extraordinary prows and wizards and witches in lavishly decorated costumes manoeuvred them in the miniature labyrinth of the canals.

They watched as their guides led them under antique bridges as extraordinary as the rest of the sculptures, observes fairies dance in the flowers, and felt effusions both of Dark and Light magic.

Needless to say, Alexandra had to fight her urges – for the Hydra and she had long merged, and what was her inner animal and what was her were difficult to distinguish – and this pure water was temptation itself.

The Morrigan’s Champion plunged her hands into the waters and just enjoyed the view and everything she could feel via her extra-developed senses.

“It’s a carpet of water they rolled out for us, Morag, Hermione,” she told her friends who shared the gondola with her.

“Yes...do you think they will give us the papers to transfer to their school the moment the tour ends? Because I think half of us will sign in a heartbeat!”

“Only half of us?” Alexandra chuckled. “I think you’re definitely optimistic...”

The next minutes were spent listening to the singing of the birds and the lapping water.

It was like the whole world was perfect, everything was in balance...and magically it was the case.

“I wish we could stay like this forever...to leave all problems behind and the journey to never end.”

But it did.

Like all good things, their gondola soon arrived at the large piers before the Scuola Regina, where the red carpet definitely awaited them this time.

Alexandra didn’t care much about that. Not when she saw the dark-skinned woman standing alone before the line of ICW diplomats. Her appearance seemed to change every time she tried to focus on her, but her aura was so tenebrous there wasn’t much doubt where her allegiance was concerned.

But this wasn’t the cold overwhelming power of the Queen of the Exchequer. This power irradiating from the Venetian witch was warm, seductive, and it whispered near-unintelligible promises in her ears.

The aura of power was definitely above the average Lady-level, but it couldn’t explain everything...

Ah, of course.

“Be careful. I think the Headmistress is a former Champion of Desire.” And Lust and several other ‘sins’ would definitely be within her set of powers.

“Awesome,” Morag said. “How much are you ready to bet the daughter of this local Black Widow is the current Champion?”

“Nothing,” Alexandra smiled. “I definitely feel her presence in the crowd.” It was only the presence of hundreds of wizards and witches which made localisation a bit difficult.

Albus Dumbledore was the first to set a foot outside the gondolas, and instruments of music trumpeted in welcome instantly.

Slowly, Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, Gryffindors, and Slytherins followed in his steps. As disunited they were, it would not do to show disunion today...it would come anyway, but not before so many people...one could hope.

At least there were motives of humour. Watching Dumbledore and Headmistress Angelica Sforza stare at each other for a short period of time was hilarious, and that was perhaps an understatement.

The Defeater of Grindelwald, silver-haired and silver-bearded was in his brilliant blue-purple robes the description of the eccentric old wizard serving the cause of the Light. If it had been any other interlocutor, there was no doubt he would already have tried to kiss the hand of his Venetian counterpart. But she was a Succubus. And Dumbledore had made his life to pass anti-creature laws both at the Wizengamot and the ICW – with a distinct lack of success in the latter.

Angelica Sforza, Succubus, on the other hand...now that her senses were acclimating to her brand of darkness, Alexandra could see her ‘human appearance’ was mixing brown and black hair in a harmonious pattern. Her body, even hidden behind a respectful black robe, was shining with vitality. All in her screamed youth and power, from her dark skin to her subtle golden bracelets, in spite of the fact her real age was closer to Dumbledore’s than Alexandra’s. Her blue-green eyes and the power she imbued them were a melody resonating through the waters and the vegetation. If she wasn’t the one to create this landscape, the Head of House Sforza was definitely the one who had elevated it to the rank of floral and aquatic art.

“Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, Champions of Hogwarts,” it was really unfair that the bad guys had voices which could damn a saint. The six words were uttered like an opera singer preparing to deliver a vocal symphony in the sublime. And she spoke in English too, while the welcomes had been in Italian or affiliated dialects until now. “Welcome to the Scuola Regina.”

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Lucrezia had known her mother wouldn’t wait long before beginning to play her games.

‘Long’ in this case was exactly five minutes; the time for her to generously invite the British adults to follow her inside and command several ‘volunteers’ to show the Hogwarts students their school.

Not that it was a bad thing, since it put the greatest amount of distance between she and Albus Dumbledore. Seriously, the man was a crime against fashion. The Champion of Lust had heard rumours, but who could possibly be so blind to dare wearing these...abominable robes? The glittering of the silver clashed horribly with the purple, and the blue somehow managed to make everything worse.

The young Succubus hoped today was a just a poor senile old man mistaking his official robes for something else. Otherwise she was going to vomit...or assassinate the fool. No man or woman could be as elegant as their species, but there were some limits to her stylistic tolerance.

“And this is the Stair of the Ambassadors,” Lucrezia continued playing the guide while showing nothing of what she thought. “It took this name for the French Ambassador in the 1650s made a generous contribution when my ancestor planned for its construction.”

This was why there were so many fleur-de-lys sculpted on the marble, souvenirs of the dethroned Bourbon monarchy.

“And it was Canaletto’s students who painted the ceiling,” Eleonora added, giving her a smirk. “Lucrezia’s House tried to buy the old master with a mountain of gold and all the advantages they could think of...but he refused.”

“Impressive,” the Champion of Death said, eyes fixed on the ceiling. “We could almost believe we are at the entrance of the Grand Canal of Venice.”

Lucrezia took the opportunity to change her hair into a more flamboyant crimson colour. Ah, a twinge of desire there...quickly hidden. Damn, this Champion had near-perfect self-control on her emotions.

“We’re going to have to end this tour soon,” the female Light Champion of the Scuola Regina mentioned with a detached air. “There are a lot of official presentations to do before lunch, and we are half a school away.”

“Presentations?” the sole male of the group asked. Physically, he was not so bad, but magically, he was rather...average. His name was Roger something. For his sake, Lucrezia hoped he wouldn’t have to participate in the Tournament. But then, the chances were high that out of these five students, four served as decoration, morale support, and research team.

“The Beauxbatons Champions arrived yesterday,” the scion of House de Riva gently informed them. “It would be rude not to make official presentations.”

The youngest and most powerful member of the Hogwarts’ group made a sound which could be the echo of a chuckle.

“I already met the first Champion of Beauxbatons before...though I don’t think we could call it ‘official presentation’.”

Lucrezia had nothing against Eleonora, but the way the Champion of Innocence tried to find the most diplomatic terms in her head was incredibly satisfying.

“The Delacour Heiress is....certainly spirited.”

“That’s a way to describe it. Most people would say she’s a fanatical bitch who should have been drowned at birth for the sake of the world.”

As far as diplomacy went...it carried the point across.

“I hope you and she can...refrain from using violent means to settle your feuds?”

The British Lady shrugged, and her green eyes appeared to burn with the flames of Death. Pluto’s pits, the Morrigan had really chosen a lethal weapon for her Champion. Normally, the Venetian Heiress would have said it was just suicide for a fourteen-year-old, no matter how skilled, to participate in that Tournament.

“I will respect the rules we had to sign a month ago.” The other witch promised. “Unless the French psychopath attacks me without reason, I will wait for the Tournament Trials to...rectify a few problems.”

“Killing is not the solution to every problem, Death.”

It was a good try, Lucrezia would give Eleonora that. Appeasing tone, neutral eyes, little to no accusation in her facial expression or her body...and it was not enough.

“Innocence. Are you ready to swear to me the Veela hybrid is ready to honestly apologise and abandon her quest to kill me?”

The older girl didn’t answer. They all knew the answer. Unless Ra told Delacour in firm and totally unambiguous terms the Dark Champions were off-limits, the Champion of the Archangel Michael would continue to pursue the Dark Champions with her unjustified hatred and loathing.

“I thought so. And please Lust, don’t smile like that, it’s creepy.”

“I prefer Desire,” the daughter of the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina pouted. “And I am ready to apologise for a lot of things...in private.” Her tone was sufficiently sultry and seductive to leave little doubts as to what she referred. “We Champions can enjoy each other’s presence, no?”

The expression she received in return was like she was the naive child of the two, not the elder.

“I take it you haven’t had the dubious pleasure of meeting Chaos one-on-one, to speak such words.”

“I have not this...pleasure, no. The delegation of Durmstrang will likely arrive this evening.”

“You were lucky.” And even if she wasn’t a Champion, Lucrezia would have been able to notice how heartfelt the sentence was.

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It was really impressive how Fleur Delacour could glare so much while continuing to eat her pasta plate. Henri was almost tempted to organise a competition of glares, to see if the other Champion could win it without effort. At the very least, their delegation would thank the Powers the Minister’s daughter was a Veela, and as such unable to gain any Animagus form. Evidently, Gorgon and Basilisks were beings of the Dark, but the Light had some favourites which could give painful curses through their eyes. The French wizard didn’t remember who had said first they were an imperfect mirror of one’s soul, but it remained true.

“So the monsters are all together.” The Champion of Life did a very convincing imitation of a snake when she hissed like that.

For once, Henri couldn’t let this go.

“Eleonora is at the same table as Lucrezia Sforza and Alexandra Potter.” The Champion of Horus reminded her severely. “And I don’t see Romeo Malatesti or Teleklos Arali anywhere near them.”

The Scuola Regina had placed tables allowing only thirteen people to sit together, but it was not the real reason the Champions of the Dark were separated. All had their own methods of approach, and if the Champion of Venus was playing the card of seduction and friendship...as much friendship as could be believed under the circumstances...others would walk on different paths.

“Innocence shouldn’t be with them.” This time it was his turn to be on the receiving end of her glare. Henri ignored her and resumed eating slowly his basil-aromatised pasta meal. “Do you listen to me?”

“I listen to you.” It was hard to do the opposite, save placing his hand on his ears, or curse her with a silencing spell. “I fail to do how it is my problem. Eleonora is by our laws an adult, and I am not her tutor or in a position of authority over her. And even if I wasn’t, I hardly see the problem about the two of them discussing the artworks of the Scuola Regina.”

Thanks to his inhuman senses, it was not difficult to eavesdrop on the discussion of the Dark Champions, and for the moment, all that had been discussed was sculptures, paintings, mosaics, canals, Venice, the local weather, and more artistic debates.

It was a very...normal artistic discussion, all things considered.

“The two are monsters. Death especially. She has grown stronger since the last time we met.”

“It was more than six months ago, and she was barely thirteen then. To have her stagnate would have been extremely surprising.” The period between thirteen and fifteen was one of exponential progress no matter the school you were going to. His parents had long insisted about it. Wizards and witches remained young enough to soak knowledge like sponges, but had gained enough brainpower to focus on some difficult magical fields.

“You don’t take me seriously.”

“No, I take your concerns very seriously,” he answered while emptying his glass of wine. Truly the Scuola Regina was treating them like kings and queens. This was a really good vintage...of course they served it only to the adult Champions. “I am not exactly enthusiastic discovering how badly the Army of the Light dropped the ball and failed to notice that a fourteen-years-old witch is right now the second most dangerous Dark Champion of our generation.”

“She’s not-“

“My parents allowed me to stand with them at a diplomatic gala for the Summer Solstice. The Chaos psychopath was there. If you think the Champion of Death is the most dangerous threat, I advise you to reconsider.”

Being in the presence of the Dark Queen of Durmstrang had been one of those humbling experiences which reminded you there were always bigger monsters waiting in the darkness, no matter how many victories you scores. He had a feeling the tsar’s daughter had not considered him an enemy; no the murderess had stared like he was *prey*.

It wasn’t a very comfortable memory.

“Perhaps,” Fleur grudgingly admitted, “but the monster of Chaos is seventeen and should stop her growth in power soon. This one is far younger and still has grown so much in power that her magical core is larger than ours.”

“Power isn’t everything,” Henri said calmly as he finished his pasta.

“I still think you are not taking this seriously.” Was he going to receive a medal for tolerating hundreds of hours this cousin of the harpies? “Maybe I should speak with the Archmage about your lack of determination.”

“Please do so,” the Heir of the de Condé line grabbed his napkin. “And give him the message that unlike some, I don’t feel the need to react like a hot-headed fool at the first sign of contrariety. This is a seven months-long Tournament. I won’t throw everything to the bottom of the Venetian canals just because you are feeling impatient.”

“You are playing the game of our enemies.”

Henri gave Fleur Delacour an ironic expression.

“I think the Headmistress of the Scuola Regina hasn’t exactly tried to hide who she is.” If this Succubus wasn’t a former Champion of Desire and a current Knight of the Exchequer, the agent of Horus was ready to pay all the fines possible evoked by the rules of the Tournament. “Why don’t you try to kill her, if you feel we mustn’t play the games of our enemies?”

For all the claims of ‘Djedefptah Isesi’, the young adult wizard had not deluded himself in thinking they had come to Venetia in a position of strength. While the ultimate goals of the Exchequer weren’t exactly difficult to guess, the exact means by which the Dark Lords and Ladies would use were completely unknown. Worse, so far the ‘diplomatic talents’ of the Army of Light had resulted in no Dark Champion willing to speak to them. Lucrezia was a charming creature, but it was clear she would joyously see them murdered without raising a finger...and Horus’ Champion admitted she wouldn’t be an idiot to do so. The Light had tried to kill her so many times in the last decade that every bridge had long been burned.

“She will die in due time.” The blonde girl said at last.

“Hmm...”

For everyone’s sake, Henri prayed the plan would be a good one. They were in the Succubus’ seat of power. Like all roses, it had its thorns...the international complications aside, a failed attempt on the life of such an influential person would likely see all assassins and accomplices die before the next dawn came.

“The Archmage thinks the Champion of Death is a Basilisk Animagus.”

Was it one more test of loyalty from the Army of Light, he wondered? Oh, very well time to fail it.

“I trust only what I see from my eyes. Give me something else than unverified speculations, and maybe I will begin to take some of your affirmations seriously.”

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“I don’t like her.” Susan growled.

“You’re even prettier when you’re jealous,” Alexandra commented.

“She tried to flirt with you!”

“Oh, she did more than that,” the Champion of Death raised an amused eyebrow. “My fellow Champion has been constantly flaring her Lust aura since she became our guide, isn’t that right?”

The Venetian Succubus corrected an imaginary flaw in her hair – that she had managed to change to platinum in less than two seconds. That alone was a confirmation if there was need of one.

“You’re trying to break our relationship and you find it funny?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the obsidian eyes of the Champion, black dots engulfing the very light, made Susan took a step back. Yes, for all her human appearance, the being Venus had chosen wasn’t born human. “You’re a very cute couple; it would be a shame to set you against each other.”

Crimson seductive lips smiled at them.

“I’m more willing to be your guide in fields where my Power holds jurisdiction.”

Susan’s face grew...red. There was a lot of red.

“You...Succubus!”

“Why yes,” Lucrezia Sforza approved. “I am.”

Then her appearance shifted again, returning to a darker skin, midnight-black hair, and pale blue eyes. The uniform of the Scuola Regina, a rather conservative dark blue and green witch robe also returned, instead of the dress gown which had momentarily been presented to their eyes.

“But as funny as this scene was, I’m afraid the school’s tour is over. Your Headmaster is getting impatient and insists you are shown your quarters.”

“Really?” The Headmistress’ daughter nodded silently. “Let’s not make the Defeater of Grindelwald wait further, then.”

Inwardly, Alexandra was once more frustrated by the former Chief Warlock’s intervention. Yes, they were going to be in this school for several months, so there was time to discover more of the school tomorrow and all the days after. But honestly, it wasn’t like anyone was in a hurry. The Durmstrang students weren’t present, the official Opening Ceremony was tomorrow, and though their trunks were magically expanded, it would hardly take hours to unpack.

But Dumbledore was the Headmaster of Hogwarts...for as long as he lived or he managed to keep the confidence of the Board of Governors, anyway.

The path the Succubus was leading them rapidly ensured they knew where they were going, at least.

“The piers again? We are going to travel on gondolas once more?” Susan asked.

“Of course,” Lucrezia Sforza answered with a satisfied smirk. “We call it the scenic route.”

“Like the one we took to first arrive at your school?”

“Indeed,” the older Venetian student commented. “As I’m sure you have noticed, there are moving bridges to pass over the main canals. What you weren’t able to witness today is that on a normal school day, all of them assemble to form larger footbridges which allow us to go from class to class without losing hours in the gardens. The same will apply for your quarters.”

“Quarters we haven’t seen a trace yet,” Alexandra intervened, “I assume we aren’t going back to the village where we disembarked from our train?”

“No, it has been decided the Champions will have accommodations separate from other students,” the Succubus admitted before shrugging. “I think in the early stages some people considered giving the same quarters as the wizards and witches attending our school, but the manors in the town have not that much free space. So in the end, another solution was found.”

Another inquiry from Susan yielded no new information, and they returned under the sun where most Hogwarts’ students awaited them. There were also her three least favourite people of the teaching staff: Moody, Dumbledore, and of course the Archmage himself.

Alexandra had at least to recognise she was impressed how Lucrezia Sforza stoically ignored Ra and his terrifying Light Aura, walking to a gondola and ignoring his tirade like he didn’t exist.

“Miss Potter, there are rules you must respect. The European Magical Tournament isn’t an event built to cater to your whims.”

This was really a legendary fit of hypocrisy, coming from the man who hurt the magic equilibrium of this world by virtue of existing.

And this time, Alexandra decided she had enough. The man was always antagonistic at best, outright trying to find weaknesses to kill her at worse.

“Who is the Champion of Hogwarts, you or me?”

“This is not-“

“Who is the Champion, *Archmage*?”

The Egyptian’s face contorted for a second in fury, before becoming as emotionless as a rock.

“You are.”

“Good. I was wondering if you had forgotten that. Now let us enjoy our stay at the visit of the Scuola Regina, and stop trying to pretend be important when you are neither wanted nor desired. Everyone will be happier for it, and you might learn humility along the way.”

And she walked to the gondola with Susan.

The Succubus awaiting them stayed gaping for a few seconds...before bursting in laughter.

“Look at him,” the Champion of Desire managed to say between two giggles.

Alexandra turned her head...and saw that Ra was staring at her like she had killed his favourite pet right in front of him. Dumbledore wasn’t looking any better, it was difficult to say if he was ‘utterly outraged’, ‘aghast’, ‘explosively angry’, or something else.

“Give us the scenic route, oh gracious guide. We need something to forget these unbearable old fools.”

“Of course, dear Champion.”

This time there wasn’t any oarsman to pretend the artwork-boat was powered by anything but magic. It was fortunate, because the gondola had to navigate through several rapids and a miniature cascade, before being propelled through an immense tunnel where magical torches were burning on either side.

“We are going behind your school,” Susan affirmed. “But all we saw were mountains....unless-“

“Yes, we are going under the mountains right now,” Lucrezia confirmed. “To the second valley where the games will take place.”

“I suppose that to return to the school, there are Apparition points?” The Potter Heiress wondered, marvelling at the sculpted tunnel and the pillars. Like everything the Venetians had done with their surroundings, their current surroundings were proof magic was able to shape stone and elements into something near-unbelievable.

The current was strong, but it still took a lot of time, maybe half an hour, until the gondola slowed down and theatrically, two massive enchanted bronze gates opened before them.

The blinding light of the day was too much even for her Hydra senses for a second, but she acclimated herself quickly, faster than Susan at least.

And when her full vision was restored to its peak, the Basilisk-Slayer could only repeat the words which had become legendary, though the ‘heroes’ rarely uttered them.

“Ave Caesar, those who are about to die salute you.”

Alexandra had seen the Quidditch stadium the British Government had order to be built for the World Cup. For the sake of curiosity, a few days of summer had been spent admiring the pictures of the original Coliseum of Rome – or at least the imposing structure which remained after two millennia. She had thought herself prepared.

She wasn’t.

Towering at the heart of a valley separated in two by a powerful river their gondola was sailing towards, the new Venetian Coliseum, the ‘Colosseo’ like the Succubus had called it, was greater, larger, and had more splendour attached to it. The two lines of forty-meter statues in a real-life were not to be discounted too.

It was like the builders had replicated the Argonath of Tolkien’s world several times in Roman style...and of course added a gigantic arena for spectacles and fight to the death behind.

Despite her ability to transform into a Lernaean Hydra, despite her magical skills, despite her accomplishments...Alexandra felt really crushed before the magnificence of the constructions now revealed.

The Scuola Regina was assuredly beautiful, but the Venetian school was a museum of arts and beauty which had – by the students’ own admissions – taken centuries to be built, and tens of thousands souls had been involved in increasing the sculptures and the tapestries, the furniture and the carpets, year after year, centuries after centuries.

This however?

It didn’t seem possible mere mortals had built it.

And yet it existed, standing true like a legendary citadel come out from the Age of Legends.

“Extraordinary,” the Champion of the Morrigan’s murmured, noting Susan had taken once again her right hand in hers. “Just...wow.”

There were shouts and acclamations behind them, and Alexandra knew the other gondolas transporting the students had been convened to acknowledge the majesty of the Coliseum and everything which had been constructed next to it.

“If you turn your head,” their guide informed them with a purr of amusement, “you will be able to see your quarters.”

Self-control or not, after everything they had been presented this day, one should have expected to be disappointed. This person would have been in error. On the southern slopes of the valley, the Venetians had literally raised from nothing a miniature series of...Roman-styles villas, as far as her Hydra eyes allowed her to see. From there, she could see them brimming with wards and of course more marble statues.

But as she took on the details, her opinion was vindicated. It was definitely a style reminding you strongly of Ancient Rome, from the marble to the influx of power released by the totally-not-extravagant-palaces.

“The current Champions have the highest and most prestigious residences.” The Champion of Desire explained as if it was no big deal. “Do you want to go there or get the full tour on our rivers?”

Alexandra turned to look at Susan.

“The full tour,” the Bones Heiress smiled. “We don’t know when we will have such an opportunity alone to admire the valley and the Coliseum.”

“The full tour it is,” Alexandra said, caressing the red hair of her girlfriend.

And the gondola led them in silence to more marvels and adventure, like the Fellowship of the Ring had done once leaving the woods of Lothlórien.

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“These pools and canals are enchanting in a different way now that the sun has set down.”

Morag chuckled.

“Just so you know, Dumbledore and the Archmage were absolutely *seething* you went on a cruise and ignored their instructions for most of the afternoon. Moody looked unconcerned, but the Headmaster and his ally were literally glaring and greeting their teeth every time you were mentioned or they had to look in your gondola’s direction.”

This time it was her turn to show her amusement. As they were walking on the marble bridges of the Scuola Regina’s aquatic gardens, it was not like there were people following their moves.

“I thought Dumbledore for one had accepted his power is fading and that except teaching useful things, there’s not much he can do for this Tournament.”

“Old habits die hard,” the Irish Heiress told her. “While you were kissing your girlfriend on a lagoon cruise, he tried to waste our time.”

“Waste your time how?”

“Oh, just adding nonsensical new rules. I mean, I read the full documentation the Venetians handed us with Hermione, and I didn’t find the first edict about half of what he said. He also tried to start on his anti-Succubus propaganda.”

“Why tried?”

“Warrington and Montague walked out twenty seconds after. So did Diggory and Chang. We Ravenclaws followed them...I think that within five minutes, the Gryffindors were the only one to listen to these old men.”

“Nice to see the Champions of Hogwarts and their substitutes are clever.”

Morag stuck her tongue out.

“Just so you know, the Light wizards are going to blame you for that.”

The Potter Heiress feigned to be afraid for two seconds before laughing.

“Oh dear, they are going to curse my name. Woe is me.” The Champion of House Ravenclaw returned to a more serious expression. “These bastards want my death. I see it on their faces, clear as day. My very existence is unbearable for them. Now that I have no doubt about that, I see no reason to respect their ridiculous ideas. The rules we have to respect are those of the European Magical Tournament.”

“It works for me,” Morag replied, rolling her shoulders. “But even if there weren’t a lot of witnesses to your defiance, Dumbledore is going to expel you out of Hogwarts the moment he can get away with it, which will be probably by the end of the Tournament.”

“Yes, it would be in-character,” she admitted, “of course, in the case I win the Tournament, this may backfire on the grey-beards...a lot.”

Technically Ra had not a beard, but who was caring about that?

“The longer you are in the lead of the rankings, the more he will be tempted to get rid of you.”

“True...assuming they have Light Champions to compensate. I’ve not been really impressed by those I saw so far. And since six out of seven are already here, well...”

“It’s possible the Durmstrang Champion sworn to the Light is really powerful.”

“I try to be optimistic Morag, but if he or she was really dangerous, I don’t think the Dark Queen would have let him live.”

It was in many ways a similar situation to the one between Neville Longbottom and her. Dumbledore had not tried to send the Boy-Who-Lived against the ‘Black Witch’ she was for many reasons, but one which certainly figured in good place was that the Defeater of Grindelwald had certainly acknowledged his ‘Chosen’ had zero chance against her when she wielded Fragarach.

“Well, Light Champion or not,” Morag chuckled, “it seems punctuality isn’t-“

A geyser exploded in one of the largest pools, like her friend’s words had called a primordial water deity.

Instantly all discussions of the hundreds of students were replaced by excited acclamations, and they only grew louder as at the light of the torches and luminous Venetian animations, a massive galleon emerged from the watery depths.

If there was any doubt about who possessed this ship, the large banner of the Durmstrang Institute which was magically hoisted on top of the main mast removed it. And her Champion’s powers allowed her to perceive three noticeable auras, one Light, two Dark.

It was sad to say, but she wasn’t really surprised that one of the Dark auras was so large it made the two others tiny and insignificant in comparison.

“She’s here.”

“Ah,” her friend cleared her throat. “Let’s see the good side, should worse come to worse...the Dark Queen can only bring a galleon to sea battles.”

“Yes,” a wooden ship couldn’t even think about resisting a Dreadnought, especially one which would receive the same ‘advantages’ as the Durmstrang transport. “But then, I’m more concerned about her personal abilities, not what Durmstrang has to support her.”

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The spectacle brought familiar memories. There were Light and Dark wizards mingling with each other. The prideful new generation of scores of nations was exchange in different languages to express their joy at being invited to such a prestigious event.

Under the light of the fireworks, imaginative displays of magic and technical debates were playing out.

This was an atmosphere which was summoning back old memories. Well before this school ever existed. Well before the first houses were built on the lagoon of Venice. Well before Italy was the centre of the world. Well before the sin of arrogance took hold in his brother’s head and the greatest magical realm the world ever knew was erased from the memories of Humankind.

These were souvenirs he was fond of, but there were only memories.

Today was only a pale copy of this era of glory and – should he dare say it? – time of innocence.

Beyond the layers of contentment and satisfaction, fear, aggressiveness, avarice, bloodlust, and many other violent emotions were present. Some of them could be blamed on actions ordered by his voice; others not so much.

What a sad waste. Millennia of self-righteous behaviour, and his enemies couldn’t do better than that?

The door behind him opened, and he returned the memories to where the past where they belonged.

“Your Majesty, the assets are in place and all your recommendations have been followed to the letter.”

“**Excellent, Knight Herald**,” Osiris complimented his subordinate before asking the only question which mattered. “**Knight Recruiter told me the Hogwarts’ delegation spent the longest period close to my Coliseum. Did Dumbledore and my brother suspect anything**?”

“No, your Majesty. In fact, I heavily suspect the reason they did so was because their egos were trampled by the Champion of Death. We listened to their conversations from the moment they stepped on the gondolas, and they were more concerned about striking at Chaos, Desire, Corruption, War and the other blades of the Dark than thinking about our *true* preparations.”

The King of the Exchequer stayed silent for many heartbeats. While his Knights had done their utmost to ensure the plan worked to perfection and wards empowered by his magic had been part of the plan from the very beginning, he had not thought they would get away with it so easily.

“In the end, the arrogance of High Master Karkaroff has also proved a boon for us, your Majesty,” Knight Herald continued with his voice which had rallied thousands to his banners long ago. “The Champion of Chaos could have been tempted to oppose our actions, but her delegation has arrived too late for any perturbation to be possible before the Tournament officially begins tomorrow.”

“**Good, but keep an assembled execution force of our best assassins close, with a sentinel task force watching her**. **This insolent Heiress has proved too resourceful in the last months for us to take her lightly**.”

His subordinate coughed.

“Yes your Majesty...though Knight Executor, Knight General, and Knight Diplomat are already present and ready to fight if the situation requires it.”

“**Some prudence today and tomorrow won’t hurt us**.” The Avatar who had once been born mortal under the name of Osiris voiced. “**After all...once the Tournament is officially opened, the only possible outcomes for our enemies will be dishonour and defeat**.”

A gesture ordered his orange-robed servant to stop kneeling.

“**The last chances for a Light’s victory are beginning to burn tonight. Now let us stoke the inferno**.”

**Author’s note**: Next chapter will see the Opening of the European Magical Tournament and plenty of ceremonies. There isn’t yet blood in the water, but it is coming...

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