**Chapter 94**

**Winter Ball**

**21 December 1994, Coliseum Valley, Lands of the Scuola Regina, Magical Republic of Venice**

When her magical guardian had told her to not plan for anything on the afternoon preceding the Winter Ball, Alexandra had thought Stella Zabini was joking.

Alas, the Black Widow was many things, but on this particular point she had not lied at all.

The ‘preparations’ for the Winter Ball were really that long.

The sensations were not that unpleasant...at first.

But it was long.

It was terribly long.

And there was nothing to do as your skin was covered by layer after layer of cream and charmed products.

Alexandra had often wondered why Fred and George thought their cosmetics and other ‘enchanting beauties’ brands were going to be worthwhile money investments.

After seeing the equivalent of a small shop used upon her skin from her eyebrows to her toes, the Potter Heiress didn’t have to wonder anymore.

If only it didn’t last that long.

There was nothing to do but wait. The Ravenclaw Champion couldn’t open a book and read, not when the small army of Zabini-hired women hurried around her with quantities of things she hadn’t the least idea what they were for.

“We’re going to do the finishing touches, now,” Stella Zabini announced as two assistants helped Alexandra don the long ice-themed gloves, thus making sure that to the exception of her visage, the entirety of her body was covered by the astronomically expensive winter ballroom dress and its supporting accessories.

“Will it take one or two hours?” The Hydra Animagus replied with a feigned bored tone. “I will remind you the Ball is officially beginning in...oh, let’s say forty minutes...”

“You will be in time,” the Slytherin-Sorted witch ‘reassured’ her, “and in the case you weren’t, being late is fashionable provided the ceremony can’t begin without you.”

“Well...let’s not try that,” Alexandra said as a diadem of diamonds was carefully presented, leaving no doubt that yes, there were real gemstones, before slowly descending until it took its place and became a ridiculously expensive object that a Queen would be lucky to have. “I wouldn’t want-“

Stella Zabini presented her a mirror, and the words failed in her throat.

That...that couldn’t be her, right?

Her hair...they had been dyed red. It wasn’t the flamboyant red of her mother, or a red mane several witches could boast about.

It was a meticulously ordered river of crimson, but it was a cold reddish shade, like it had captured the essence itself of winter.

The rest of her traits were very destabilising to look at too. Her eyes still had their power, but somehow enchantments and diverse artifices had transformed them into storms of ice and snow.

Add the ice-white robe, the silver-platinum jewellery and the twisting sigils upon it, the magic swirling from her necks to her legs...and her reflection in the mirror was the one of a red-haired, blue-eyed, Queen of Winter.

“Your date is ready. Do not let her wait.” Stella Zabini disappeared in the blink of an eye, and the Potter Heiress realised suddenly her guardian had in fact used a long-distance illusion. Yeah, in hindsight, the Black Widow must have had her own ‘preparations’ to be ready for the Ball too...

Everything was ready and the young witch marched out of the room where she had been confined for countless hours.

Susan was waiting for her not ten steps ahead.

Though it took her more than five seconds to recognise her girlfriend.

If the enchantments and the hours-long procedures had turned Alexandra into a red-haired apparition, then the Heiress of House Bones had been on the end of dye which changed her hair to a black colour. And her eyes had been charmed to be seen at green.

All of it had been done into a winter style, but it wasn’t difficult to guess at the imagery Stella Zabini and whoever had schemed this had gone for.

Not when the dress of the Hufflepuff was the dark green of winter firs mixed with the snow of eternal winter.

It was very sly to have done it behind the scenes.

Alexandra couldn’t even muster any anger, because the gowns were strikingly beautiful alone, and the closer they were from each other, the more perfect they seemed to be.

“Ready, Lady Potter?”

“I am ready, Lady Bones,” given the siren-like tonality her voice had taken, other Charms had made sure to give her vocal chords some serious alterations. The Succubi and Incubi didn’t speak like that when they debated in the halls of the Venetian school, and their voices were imbued with their seduction skills.

“Good. Our gondola is waiting for us.”

Alexandra raised an eyebrow.

“I thought the gondolas could only go one-way from the Scuola Regina to the Coliseum. The river is flowing in the wrong direction if one wants anything else.”

“Maybe, they are any other day of the year,” Susan pressed her hands in hers, and by Death and all Powers, she was a Goddess in dark emerald tonight. “But not tonight.”

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

For all his anxiousness, Neville could acknowledge the Dark Lords and Dark Ladies who had organised the European Magical Tournament had done their best to make this Winter Ball an evening that would be remembered for years to come.

Somehow, for this night, the Venetians had entirely frozen the river, and the ‘ships’ were functioning as sleds while on both banks ice cascades shone in a pale blue light.

They didn’t go in the water tunnels this time. Instead their method of transportation was towed by some invisible ropes to climb the hilly slopes nearly as fast as a Quidditch broom could, and the descent was equally amazingly quick.

And once this acceleration and deceleration were over...the Scuola Regina awaited.

Sunset was long gone, but the scene made the scene all the more awe-striking.

Tens of thousands of torches were burning everywhere, revealing a land covered in snow where the flames were coexisting with the ice. This wasn’t the only thing the organisers of the Tournament had modified since yesterday, obviously. The flowers hanging in the floating gardens were certainly not the ones which had been cultivated days ago.

Neville knew he could sometimes not pay attention to details, but he was sure flowers which appeared to be built from snowflakes and frost were impossible to miss.

Could Hogwarts have enchanted something so beautiful? Neville, for all his love of his school, honestly hesitated to say ‘yes’.

As the ‘sled-gondola’ raced to end their short journey, more and more breathtaking ice sculptures were revealed.

Medieval knights were standing there, hundreds of them, silent armies facing something that looked to be a dragon, but one so big the future Lord Longbottom knew the artist had taken a few liberties with reality. No dragon was that big.

As it vanished in the obscurity, where the inspiration of the Scuola Regina’s Professors and students had been taken from did not take a genius to find out. A gargantuan sea snake seemed to sleep near the frozen water. A lifeless Griffin was immobile atop a great stalagmite. The Cockatrice looked malevolently at them. And the Chimera was showing a lot of fangs and natural weapons.

And yes, behind them, there was an exact copy of the Egyptian temple of the Second Task.

Was it purely for scenery purposes, or was it a silent threat that those monsters and dangers were only the prelude of worst things to come? Neville didn’t know...and he wasn’t sure he wanted to, to be honest.

The ice sculptures were so real he failed to notice the moment their improbable sled stopped. Unfortunately or fortunately, Lavender didn’t.

And his arm was going to remember her ‘affection’ in the next minutes, given how strongly she grabbed it.

Seriously, for a girl with absolutely zero practise of any physical activity, the Brown Heiress was surprisingly strong....where was all this strength coming from?

“Smile,” the blonde-haired Gryffindor ordered him. “And be on your best behaviour. I will not let you ruin this evening.”

“You know, I am the Gryffindor Champion,” Neville commented in a murmur.

“When you will act like one, I will treat you as one.” The unnaturally aggressive girl retorted. “This is, as they say, my Task tonight. It is the event of the decade, maybe of the century. I have been granted the chance to attend it. I am not going to let *anyone* ruin it.”

If anyone had arrived right now to tell him Lavender was innocent and fragile in her soft pink-white princess robe, Neville would have regarded him like one looked like a madman.

The Marauders had known what they were talking about when writing Rule Number One. Women could be truly the most dangerous species in the known and unknown world when fashion, dance, and balls were mentioned.

“I will be chivalry incarnate.” He promised to his ‘date’, cursing one more time Alexandra Potter. Yes, he hadn’t had a partner so far, but he would have found one...one which wouldn’t look at him like he was a succulent steak piece...eventually.

“Good. Oh, Pansy and Millicent are coming.”

Turning his head, the Boy-Who-Lived amended his words. Maybe, just maybe, going to the Winter Ball with Lavender Brown was not so bad after all.

It was not so great, he had to convince his grandmother to release some Galleons so that he could buy Lavender’s choice of dress for their duo – which was close a dark pink for him, in case one wondered – and agree to many concessions he would have preferred not to.

But it could be worse.

Leo definitely proved it, seeing how he was ‘handled’ by Pansy Parkinson.

“Oh, dear.” Yes, even Lavender could see, how...how little ‘friendship’ and ‘bonds’ had been forged in the last days. Leo looked like a beaten dog, no pun intended, and Parkinson had a very, very nasty smirk.

“By the way,” Neville cleared his throat and then resumed speaking in a whisper as the Slytherin-Gryffindor ‘partnership’ passed before them without stopping, the golden dress of Parkinson dragging the black robes of Leo Black towards the lights of the school’s halls. “Why isn’t she going with Draco Malfoy? Not that I’m complaining, of course, but-“

“You can ask her yourself, if you wish to know.” The Brown Heiress told him coldly.

“Neville, old chap!”

This time, Neville outright chuckled, for the new gondolas who had arrived were painted in bright orange, and two pranksters who were impossible to mistake for someone else came forwards.

“And he has found himself an adorable pink rose!” George said haughtily as he agitated ridiculously his arms.

Lavender glared at him, but somehow the Weasley Twins were completely unaffected by her threatening eyes.

“Hey, everyone has found a partner!” Fred exclaimed lightly. “Warrington had one, our little brother found...a strong Slytherin...”

The timing was perfect, for this was the moment Ron arrived.

And his expression was...okay, it was a bit haunted.

His cheeks were red too.

And this was Millicent Bulstrode on his arm.

What...what by Fate and all the Old Powers?

Leo had told him reluctantly who had accepted to be his partner yesterday. But Ron had refused.

And now his right arm was grabbed by the strongest Slytherin girl of their year.

What in the name of Merlin and Morgana was happening?

At least they were some signs of sanity. Angelina Johnson went to stand by Fred’s side, and Alicia Spinnet imitated her next to George. The bets hadn’t been wrong about that, no matter how else they had failed to warn him about.

And then a wave of Darkness was here.

From the obscurity the two girls came. And on this day of the Winter Solstice, where the Dark Powers were at the apex of their influence and strength, Neville shivered.

Susan Bones and Alexandra Potter looked like the Queens of old which would have led the armies of knights left immobile next to the Scuola Regina.

Or was it Alexandra Potter and Susan Bones?

Their hair and eyes had been enchanted to look like each other...but the power of Death was unmistakably more powerful in the Champion of Ravenclaw, and she was currently looking like a red-haired Queen of Winter.

“This is going to be incredibly exciting!” Lavender exclaimed before ordering him again. “Let’s follow in their steps. I have to ask them which shop and designers they chose...”

This Winter Ball really promised to be a torture in a different way than all Tasks would be...

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Alexandra did her best to keep a serene expression on her face as they entered the Scuola Regina.

Neville Longbottom and his two partner-in-crimes didn’t make the task easy, oh no.

“This was adorably cruel of you, Alexandra.” Susan commented, a smile on her beautiful lips.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Our sole and only Boy-Who-Lived looks like he’s about to experience a session with...how did Hermione call the non-magical job? The dentists?”

“Yes, the dentists...but come on, Neville Longbottom is astonishingly happy to be here!”

 So what if the new Gryffindor Champion couldn’t hide a small grimace when Lavender Brown ‘escorted’ him through the halls?

“Yes, I see that. Were you involved in the choice which led to this pink-red dress combination?”

“Oh, no,” Alexandra replied truthfully. “Past the initial ambush of the prey, I was only tangentially involved.” As amusing as the issue was, there were too many bloody things that needed to be dealt with those last days. “I’m sure this evening is going to be a splendid achievement.”

“You mean that the moment the Winter Ball is over, they will try to murder each other?” The Bones Heiress asked as they passed through an alley of conjured metallic armours. If they hadn’t had a vibrant Italian style, one would have almost believed oneself at Hogwarts. On the other hand, the Scottish castle had never tried a wide-scaled illusion like the one they were walking into. It was very much like it was snowing everywhere, and winter animals were materialising out of nowhere to watch them arrive.

“I call that progress. They couldn’t tolerate each other’s presence for a single evening.”

As the distance between the ballroom and them was shorter, Italian-sung winter music began to resonate across the corridors, and the flow of students in very expensive dresses divided into two.

The yellow-orange, impossible-to-miss, duo of the Weasley Twins and the Gryffindor Chasers went to the left. Alexandra thought that far away she saw Morag having dyed her hair to blue to match the robe she was wearing, but a Venetian ballroom organiser rapidly led her in the opposite direction.

Twenty seconds later, they were introduced in the presence of the Champions who had preceded them. And the first surprise was-

“Wow! This is...Hermione Granger?”

The surprise was more than justified.

Hermione didn’t...well, admittedly, Alexandra had no room to judge here given her change of looks, but her friend transformation was perhaps as significant if not more. The bushy hair had completely disappeared, and her hair was now a river of brown which had zero flaws.

Hermione looked taller. Some of it was undoubtedly the black heels, but it couldn’t be only that. The Ravenclaw library-lover was radiant tonight, and the majestic red robe she had donned with some fur on the shoulders was giving her the vibes of a noblewoman coming straight from a Viking raid.

Krum, if anything, absolutely loved it, given how he didn’t keep his eyes off her.

“Yes, she is Krum’s date tonight.”

Susan pouted.

“You knew, and you didn’t tell me.”

“You would have constantly teased her until this afternoon, and no doubt a few members of the idiotic pride would have tried to ruin her happiness.”

“It would have been a good teasing...unfortunately, you’re right for the reactions of the idiots. Everyone has truly tried his or her best to look resplendent, no?”

“Yes, they have. It isn’t like there are a thousand Balls during this Tournament.”

In fact, there would be only one more; while the Venetian Carnival was sure to have some Winter Ball-level events, they were sure to be masked balls, and maybe integrated into a Task. Tonight’s event wasn’t a Task, though obviously the competition was never far away.

“Good point. A good thing my aunt and your guardian gave us splendid robes. Otherwise we would be the target of jokes for the rest of our lives.”

Susan was definitely right about that. The duo of Viktor Krum and Hermione Granger was impressive, but it was only one of many.

For example, Lucrezia Sforza had clearly understood going half-naked was not an option tonight, and the Succubus had spared no expense. Her queenly robe was leaving none of her skin to be revealed, but it managed to espouse her curves in a sea of gold and ivory which left her partner drooling. After a couple of seconds, Alexandra finally recognised him: it was Cicerone de Medici, cousin of the Champion who had congratulated her after the First Task.

The styles of Winter Ball’s robes and other spectacular clothes were very different from each other. Cho Chang must have gained the upper hand in the relationship, for both her green-gold dress and Cedric Diggory’s robes were of Chinese style.

Neville and Lavender were more in some sort of French-British pink union. For the Boy-Who-Lived sake, Alexandra hoped he would be able to avoid a future marriage with the Brown Heiress...though it would obviously be very amusing.

Henri de Condé and Eleonora da Riva had chosen to attend the Winter Ball together. Their clothes were elegant and yet simple, a pure white with no other colour to amend the message they were sending. Ambre de Courtois had come with another French student in an ocean blue robe. Lucas Gauthier’s was in a uniform reminding her of the Napoleonic Era, and his female companion was in a light blue dress.

Armand Coularé de Lafontaine’s choice was far more pompous. But why most of Alexandra’s attention focused on him for long seconds was because his partner was another male student.

And he wasn’t the only one.

“So Malatesti sees no problem kissing women *and* men,” Susan murmured to her ear, as the black-and-red Champion of War had his hands on the body of a blonde-haired male Durmstrang student. For those who wondered, no, the location of the fingers couldn’t be considered platonic. “And since you aren’t surprised-“

“I didn’t know, my dear Lady Bones,” the temporarily blue-eyed witch admitted. “But I am not surprised. One can’t be the Champion of a Power without some of said Power’s ideals, qualities, and quirks. And this particular aspect of War wasn’t known to choose women and ignore men.”

Thankfully, for all his stupidity, Romeo Malatesti had so far not done anything too outrageous outside of the Coliseum.

But he cut a very impressive figure right now. It wouldn’t do to underestimate him.

The same couldn’t be thought when Cassius Warrington appeared, holding the hand of the Venetian witch he had convinced to be his partner for the Winter Ball. The brown-haired girl did not look pleased at all to be here, and it did not require to be as fashionable as Stella Zabini to know why: her Victorian-era violet dress had no synchronisation whatsoever with the Slytherin green robes of Cassius Warrington.

Alexandra inspected the hands of the Junior Death Eater, and sure enough, here and there, some nails had shown their displeasure.

“We’re missing a few Champions,” her girlfriend smiled as some musical instruments began to play out behind the massive door of silver and bronze separating the Tournament participants from the rest of the crowd. “I don’t see the Dark Queen.”

“I don’t see Champion Falk either...oh never mind, here he is.”

The Light Champion who had been chosen alongside Longbottom to participate in the Third Task was indeed here, and unlike the other Durmstrang Champions, who had chosen clear militarist styles for the event, his was more like something pompous and extravagant in gold and white. By the very colours, it should be close to what Lucrezia Sforza was wearing...but it wasn’t. Frode Falk wore two-thirds of gold for one-third of white, and the former was deliberately placed to attract all the attention. The fanatic of the Army of Light had come with a haughty-looking Beauxbatons witch. Alexandra couldn’t remember her name, but since the Basilisk Slayer could see faint traces of Light Magic dancing around her, logic dictated it was another follower of Ra.

“You’d better be careful during the Third Task, Alex. I don’t like the way he is looking at us.”

“I intend to be very careful, my lovely Badger, and during all the Tasks. Unless someone manages to remove him immediately, I seriously doubt he will stop at one murder attempt. And besides-“

Alexandra stopped what she was about to say, as three of the Judges came forwards, each dressed in clothes which emphasized their magical cultures. The Potter Heiress admitted she liked very much the huge and tall hat of Judge Varga. It was very...very picturesque.

“Champions. Is everyone here?”

“Not quite, your Honour, there is one-“

The doors in their back opened again, and Alexandra knew who it was before looking, as the familiar chaotic power overwhelmed everything.

Still, when she turned her head, Alexandra gaped.

Like her fellow Durmstrang students, the Tsar’s daughter had chosen to go on the militarist clothes’ path. Her dress thus wasn’t princely, dreamy, or queenly; it was a true black uniform with constellations of amethyst gemstones serving as the buttons and the rest of the eighteenth century-style decorations was equally as outrageous and expensive.

But above this, instead of a small amount of fur like Krum wore, the Champion of Loki had literally hunted a massive Polar Bear, and the fur and the head had been repurposed for tonight. How could Alexandra say it with such certainty? It was simple. The head of the bear was now the hood of the large white cloak, Heracles-style.

This was already a shock to see the Dark Queen like this.

But then Alexandra’s eyes posed on the woman who was walking on her right.

If Lyudmila Romanov was promised violence and martial might in a single sentence, then everything about her partner seemed delicate, and the blonde’s white dress seemed ethereal and half-way to the crystal.

Alexandra gaped.

She couldn’t pretend to be familiar with the woman, but it couldn’t be her.

Surely even the Champion of Loki wouldn’t be that insane-

But the faint scars were there, on half of the face.

And the slowness the older witch advanced was certainly due to injuries-

“This...” Susan struggled to find her words, and judging by the gasps of the other Champions, she was far from the only one. “How by the catacombs of my ancestors-“

“By the fires of the Balrog and every evil in this world,” Alexandra swore, “how in hell did the bloody Dark Queen successfully convinced Fleur Delacour to be her dance partner for the Winter Ball?”

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The insults were out of his mouth before he could control them.

“I apologise,” Henri told Eleonora once he regained a shred of self-control.

“Apologies accepted,” the Champion of Innocence said. “And I don’t think I am going to say your reaction is inexcusable...not when everyone sane is no doubt wondering the same thing.”

“Yes...” Henri shook his head and stopped the ridiculous hallucination would stop. But the antechamber to the Winter Ballroom refused to return to something reaching the sanity threshold. “What the hell?”

“I don’t know what is happening,” the white-clad Champion of Vesta openly admitted. “But I don’t find it funny. “Please tell me it’s an impostor. Please tell me we aren’t seeing Fleur Delacour placing her right hand in the left hand of the Chaos psychopath.”

“I...” The words failed him once again, one more unpleasant thing this Tournament was forcing him to face. “I can’t.”

The magical essence of Life was weak, as expected after the First Task, but it was there for everyone to see. And there was no easy way to fake it, not when the audience to trick included several Champions of the Light and the Dark, who were all trying to dispel potential illusions and enchantments.

It truly was Fleur Delacour in this white ball dress of princess. For sole embellishments she had a thin crown of white flowers in her golden air and two silver bracelets around her wrists...bracelets which were metallic and forged into wolfish shapes.

“Maybe the Imperius?” The Champion of Horus weakly suggested.

This certainly was the only explanation he could find on short notice which made sense.

Honestly, what else could be a reasonable and logical answer?

Henri had met Fleur Delacour enough times to know, beyond any attempt to be deceived, that the daughter of the French Minister hated the Dark, its Champions, and everyone who was allied or supporting covertly the Exchequer...just to begin with.

Last time they had seen her in the flesh, the half-Veela had been busy trying to kill the Champion of Death, something which had resulted in her near-death and immediate evacuation to the nearest hospital.

“I know how to recognise the little signs of the Imperius, Henri, and there are none of them here.” Eleonora demolished instantly his theory.

“In that case...I really have no idea...”

The current leader of the European Magical Tournament’s rankings continued to take step after step until she was at wand’s reach of the three Judges.

The two wizards and the witch were, by the way, as visibly caught by surprise as all the Champions had been.

“I think we are all ready to proceed.”

Nothing else was said, but the Beauxbatons pureblood could hear from here the gloating the Dark Queen had not voice.

“What the hell...” He repeated as Fleur Delacour didn’t struggle, didn’t fight the contact with the touch of the most dangerous Champion of Durmstrang of the last several decades.

“Henri.” The calm voice of Eleonora successfully returned him from the lands of stupefaction where he was lost.

“Yes?”

“If there is a Tournament Clue to be found for the next Task tonight, we absolutely have to find it before the Chaos psychopath. Given how unpredictable she has proven to be, I am not confident we will be able to outsmart her under any circumstance...”

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There were many things to say about the Tournament. It was deadly. You could definitely die the moment a Task began, and as long as it wasn’t declared over by the Judges, your life was in danger every step of the way.

But Alexandra wasn’t going to be a hypocrite: there was no way any of the three other schools participating would have done better than the Scuola Regina when it came to the number of spectators and the sheer artistic effort deployed in their honour.

The Winter Ballroom which had been inaccessible to the public was revealed as the gates opened, and it was prodigious.

There were two rows of gigantic ice statues representing magnificent pegasi. The ceiling was a combination of strange stalactites and moving paintings of snow storms and winter activities.

The entire ballroom was like it was a jewel of crystal and ice, and there was nothing to do but marvel at it while the red carpet was unfurled literally and metaphorically before them.

They were fifteen couples – due to the fact De Condé and Da Riva were together – and they had a huge crowd to amaze.

Naturally, the dance floor was enormous. How could it be otherwise when there were at least several thousand wizards and witches invited for this inter-school event?

They were given ten seconds to pose for the newspapers’ photographs, and then the orchestra began to play a waltz.

It was...easier than she thought to dance in her too-elaborate winter dress.

It was over quickly too.

This was just the opening dance, as tradition required. The succession of dancing songs and whatever the Sforza Headmistress had organised were going to be for later.

For now, Alexandra, Susan, and all the other Champions were spread out across the myriad of tables.

“I thought we would get a single table for the Champions,” her girlfriend informed her as they were constantly forced to pause because it seemed the entire world wanted to take photos with her or shake her hand.

“So did I,” Alexandra said, pausing as a wizard clad in nothing but a loincloth, certainly a denizen of far-away Pacific islands, shook her hand like she was an old friend, before allowing her to pass. The scent of the oil he had soaked his body with was extremely strong for her Hydra senses. It wasn’t unpleasant, just...fruity. “But I’m sure we are going to have excellent company...”

Less than a minute later, Alexandra could taste the irony of her words. The seating may be very random at first glance, but it wasn’t.

Oh no, it wasn’t.

Otherwise, why would the napkin bearing her name in golden enchanted letters was to be found on the left of the seat where Morgane Rys’Ygraine Avalon was waiting for them?

To the Champion of Death’s relief, this appeared to be the only member of the Exchequer to be found among the twenty-plus seats of this round table.

And there were familiar faces which were more welcome than the Queen of the Exchequer. Maharaja Raja Wodeyar the Tenth, for one. The Indian ruler had dressed splendidly for the occasion, of course: his ‘winter robe’ was a delicate assemblage of white feathers, which was somehow holding effortlessly despite the vigorous waving of its owner. The joyous gambler would not be what he was without a tamed animal of his zoo, and tonight, an adorable Red Panda was perched on one of his shoulders. At least Alexandra thought it was a Red Panda; the animal’s fur had been charmed white to go with the Maharaja’s white feathers.

Soon, Morag and Blaise joined them. The Ravenclaw Champion noted with a roll of her eyes that unlike Susan and she, they had been able to cross twice the distance they had made in a tenth of the time.

Alexandra watched over the table carefully, but apart from the fact there were countless winter decorations at the centre of the table, nothing reeked of a trap. Well, there was a big Easter Egg flanked by ten miniature ice sculptures, which was not very ‘Yule-traditional’, but there was no active magic around that.

“Please take your seats,” the Queen of the Exchequer enunciated with an amused voice, “the banquet of the Winter Ball that has been prepared for you is something to behold, I promise.”

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Morgane was impressed.

In spite of being completely ill-at-ease in her presence, Alexandra Potter managed to look like nothing was out of the ordinary.

It would be almost sufficient to fool her, if the former Champion of Death had not centuries of experience observing young witches.

Still, it remained a very convincing effort. The Maharaja of Mysore and the representative of Lithuania present at their table certainly did not have any reason to complain about the debate.

Morgane intervened rarely in this conversation. Not that she had a lack of interest in magical and non-magical beasts, and the illusions which could fool them, but it was more appropriate to observe the girl who could be one day her Apprentice.

Tonight, Alexandra Potter looked very much like a younger Lilian Evans had once been during a winter ball hosted by Angelica Sforza.

It was only the looks, of course. Ra and Dumbledore may think the daughter was following in the footsteps of her mother in every way which mattered, but they couldn’t be more wrong. The Apprentice of Knight Recruiter was not particularly physically strong before her transformation into a vampire. Sports had not been Lilian’s cup of tea. And as long as she stayed human, the redhead witch had kept an inexhaustible...love of forbidden magics and idealism to practise them.

Yes, the magical interests could seem similar between the daughter and the mother, but it was only at first sight. Potions had been one of Lilian’s predilection subjects, and one where she could evidently have already made herself a name if not for the adverse circumstances of the last decade. Her daughter had a gift for it too, but would likely consider it one more weapon in her arsenal, not something she wanted spend her life discovering and relying upon as a job.

“I have a question, Lady Morgane.”

“I am listening, Champion Potter.”

The Queen of the Exchequer just hoped it was not about the Champion of Chaos’ latest stunt. This was the sole and only surprise of the evening, but Morgane wasn’t going to pretend she had seen it coming.

“What is this egg doing on our table?”

“The egg?” Her eyes of Vampiri Romani focused on it an instant, before refocusing on the young witch dressed in her dignified robe of winter colours. “It is a Pysanka egg. The origins of it are Slavic, but the Ministries of Poland and Ukraine both try to claim it was one of their artists who made the first one.”

“Ah. It is rather pretty...but it does not have any other use?”

“As far as I know,” the Lithuanian wizard at their table replied in accented French, “there are no uses beyond the artistic, no. I’m told the non-magical population has taken inspiration from it and is now making excellent chocolate objects in their image, but the Pysanky eggs remain purely for the delight of the eyes.”

“Interesting,” Raja Wodeyar the Tenth commented while caressing his white-charmed panda who had taken refuge in his arms while they were eating the banquet’s dinner. “Is it possible the famous Faberge jeweller who worked in magical and non-magical Russian courts used the Pysanky eggs as an inspiration for his creations?”

“He certainly did,” the representative of the Lithuanian conceded...after a grimace.

Morgane took the opportunity to sip the blood syrup in her glass to hide a smile.

“You do not seem to be fond of the Russians, Lord.” Alexandra Potter said between two sessions of devouring an impressive quantity of sea food, as befitting the appetite of her Animagus form.

“No one who has met the Tsar, his daughter, or the main nobles of Moscow is fond of the Russian court.” The Lithuanian Ministry official snorted. “And the better you know them, the more you want to have nothing to do with them. I really hope the French witch knows what she’s doing accepting the invitation of this vicious Dark Lady.”

 Ordinarily, Morgane would have found a way to mollify the wizard’s words. If for no other reason that she was a Dark Lady as the majority of Europe defined it, and far more capable to set the continent aflame if she chose to.

But the current Russian line had sired so many sociopaths and cruel children over the last centuries that the concerns of the Eastern Europe diplomats were absolutely warranted.

“You have a point. And many African factions like ours are...extremely concerned whenever Champion Lyudmila Romanov is mentioned. The rules of the European Magical Tournament are what they are, we acknowledge it. But her unpredictability and how she is choosing to use her magical skills...it gives very pessimistic ideas about what her ultimate goals are.”

The political repercussions would not be light, but Morgane was more and more concerned Loki’s Champion was going to be neutralised permanently before the Seventh Task, and damn the political consequences.

“Is there a reason...hypothetically...why Champion Romanov would bear a major enmity towards the factions you were speaking about?”

The ancient vampire smiled widely at the curiousness hidden behind the question.

“Hypothetically, there is.” But she wasn’t going to give the daughter of Lilian an easy answer. “But to understand it better, I think it absolutely necessary to study how the Statute of Secrecy changed the Russian court.”

“And not for the better,” the Lithuanian official grumbled to her left.

Before anyone could add something to the obvious, the main meal of the banquet was over, and the delicacies prepared for the dessert began to materialise on the tables.

Naturally, this meant the songs and the ballroom dancing were only minutes away...

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Had there been an instance in the last century when the Champions of the Light and the Dark were gathered together in a single ballroom?

Lilian didn’t think so.

A large part of her was amazed the organisation she was part of had been able to organise it without the dangerous wizards and witches tearing each other apart.

By the Powers of the Dark, the King and the Queen had managed without a single drop of blood being shed tonight.

It was an exploit no one had been able to emulate since the Statute of Secrecy was enacted.

Of course, nothing on this planet was powerful enough to erase the arrogance and the self-righteousness of the Army of Light and the Trinity.

No one had clean hands in this millennia-old war, but the Dark had never pretended to be a bastion of purity and innocence. And the Champions of War, Chaos, Death, and their allies were using this event to show off brand-new extremely expensive clothes, unlike some.

At least it made the Light Champions very easy to distinguish in the middle of the crowd.

The only exception was the successor of Lorenzo de Medici. Whoever he or she was the new Champion of Unity, it was something extremely...foggy, at least from a magical sensing effort.

But this was the exception.

Frode Falk, the Champion of Frigg for Wisdom, was swaggering and boasting of inexistent exploits, surrounded by a crowd of impressionable Light wizard and witches. His clothes were appropriate for someone of his arrogance.

Urmah Temen, the Champion of Marduk, was trying to stay in the shadows, his cold eyes always judging the Dark wizard and witches present. But his white cloak and the aura of merciless justice he was cloaked into were betraying his true nature far more than any spell could.

Neville Longbottom, Champion of Fate, was dancing with his blonde date. Or would it be more accurate to say the pink-dressed British witch he was partnered with was forcing him to dance and reaping the benefits? Lily honestly didn’t know why Dumbledore had thought it was a good idea to let him participate. There were battles you had no choice but to fight and rely on all the luck and the providence given by Fate could provide, but this Tournament wasn’t one. And Neville Longbottom didn’t look at all ready to be a major participant of the Winter Ball. What would it say for the Third Task?

On the other hand, the Champions of Horus and Vesta looked like Champions, at least. The dark blonde-haired Henri de Condé and brown-haired Eleonora da Riva had done a good job donning elegant and simple clothes. It didn’t wash away the crimes their predecessors had committed, but the female vampire could admit they were not bathing in a river of arrogance every day.

And the last one...the red-haired Apprentice Enchantress had no idea what was happening.

Fleur Delacour had tried to kill her daughter, and Lily had promised herself that if Alexandra failed to deal with her, the girl would die at the end of the Tournament by her wand. The Champion of Life was a Light fanatic, one the likes you didn’t reason with and which had participated in her first death. Her mentor had told her that anything which didn’t involve sealing them in the foundations of a pyramid or transforming their bodies into bloody fragments tended to have unpleasant consequences the longer they lived and grew into their power.

And yet the blonde witch and her robe stylised with white robes was dancing with the female Champion of Chaos, and showed absolutely reluctance being touched and carried across the ballroom.

This was a joke of Loki, and Lily didn’t find it very funny.

“Thinking about something, Lily?” Artemis asked.

“I was just realising this world had suddenly stopped having any semblance of sanity,” the red-robed vampire groaned theatrically, giving a subtle nod of her chin in the direction where the Life and Chaos Champion enraptured the audience in a series of impressive dancing moves.

“I understand...” the High Sentinel bared her teeth. “I await impatiently the explanation to this large surprise. Now...I believe you were going to introduce formally my husband to your daughter?”

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Her feet were killing her, and by that point dancing and going to find a seat was the only reasonable option.

“The waltzes are not easy with heels like this one,” Alexandra complained.

Her girlfriend chuckled in return.

“Alex, by tradition, no one is suppose to dance as long as we did...I think only Krum and his lovely partner are still trying to impress the crowd.”

“And to ensure all the fan-girls of the Quidditch superstar are dying of jealousy, no doubt,” the Potter Heiress gave the currently dark-haired Hufflepuff a sardonic expression, before blinking as a glass of a familiar liquid was placed in her meticulously manicured hands. “Champagne, at fourteen?”

“It isn’t like it’s going to have much of an effect on your head,” Susan smiled, “to our relationship.”

“To our relationship,” the Champion of the Death smiled before drinking. The sensation was nice, but her Hydra metabolism made sure it didn’t last more than a few seconds. At least it allowed her to see quickly a remarkable trio of vampires. “Susan, you asked the question how much I looked my mother. I think you can forge your answer by yourself. Hello, mother.”

“Hello, Alexandra.” The redhead vampire who had given birth to her had likely not spend dozens of hours in a beauty salon like Alexandra had to, but she didn’t really need the time to look beautiful and deadly. The red ballroom robe espousing her ivory skin was far more audacious in its cleavage and the way it exposed its legs, even compared to most of the Succubi present. Of course, being vampires, the trio did not care about the weather and the cold temperatures outside the Scuola Regina.

As for the vampire couple...they were also clad in red, which answered the implicit question if Lilian Evans, once rid of James Potter, was once again in a relationship with them. High Sentinel Artemis Cassius looked even more deadly than the first time she had met her, her current red robe looking like bait to attract her prey.

The male vampire, who had to be Coven Elder Valerian Cassius, was as impressive as this millennia-old predator. Alexandra could easily imagined this near-immortal participating in the political life of a city like Rome or Athens multiple centuries ago, the pale blonde-haired and extremely muscled Vampiri Romani seemed to create an impression of power with a few gestures.

“You look ravishing tonight. And so is your girlfriend. Lady Zabini’s work, I presume?”

“Thank you, and yes.” The young Ravenclaw Champion quipped. “We sacrificed all of our afternoon in order to meet her exacting preparations’ standards.”

“It sounds like her,” the Apprentice Enchantress nodded. “Now I introduce you Coven Elder Valerian Cassius and High Sentinel Artemis Cassius.”

“Coven Elder. High Sentinel.” Alexandra politely saluted. Since she wasn’t part of their coven or anywhere near involved in the vampire spheres, saying more in public would be considered rude or arrogant.

“Basilisk Slayer.” The male leader of the Soul Drinkers Coven replied courteously. “Your reputation is...impressive, for someone as young as you are.”

“The compliment is appreciated.” The Champion who had levitated a Leviathan replied. “I hope my young age isn’t a problem?”

“As far as your deeds are concerned, they are not,” the ancient being reassured her...and he didn’t say a single additional word.

Ah. That meant a lot of vampires didn’t doubt her power, but they were wary of the politics and everything related she might sponsor in the future.

And as much as she wanted to say the Coven Elder and most of his peers were too cautious...they weren’t. Alexandra was learning a lot of things about the Magical World, how could she not when she had ignored its existence before she was eleven?

“Well, I hope my performance during the next Tasks will be to your liking.”

“Your confidence is refreshing,” Artemis Cassius said after giving a small kiss on her mother’s cheek, “according to the rumours we hard several Champions are on the verge of panic. That is, if the rumours are true.”

“If the rumours are referring to the fact we have to use Potions to break through citadel-themed obstacles,” Alexandra was hardly giving away a secret here, everyone in the Scuola Regina by now knew the basics, “I can confirm there is a great deal of truth in them.”

“Will Slughorn’s tutoring give you a chance?” Her mother asked. As Alexandra gave her a bland look, the red-haired and red-dressed vampire gave away her motive behind the interrogation. “I knew the First Task would be something extremely suite to your natural abilities and your elemental magic’s skill set. And Filius wrote in his messages that Babbling was convinced you were a Rune prodigy.”

Alexandra sniffed in humour.

“Prodigy? He certainly didn’t use the word when we last sparred and he beat me ten times in a row.”

“Yes, it sounds like Filius.” Lilian agreed in a conspiracy-filled voice before returning to normal. “But back to the Third Task, it looks like the subject is going to involve high-level Potion brewing. And I know that for all your efforts, you are still a fourth-year student. You will begin with a significant experience drawback.”

“That’s true,” Alexandra admitted to her mother, “which is why I’m taking steps to...remedy to it.” In other words, the ‘solution’ was going to be blatantly cheating. “I won’t deny I wouldn’t say no to more information, of course.”

That said, there was little sign of any Tournament Clue being delivered tonight. The Judges, it seemed, weren’t making things easy for the Champions...one more time.

“Naturally, information is power,” though he showed little emotion, Alexandra could almost taste the male vampire’s amusement. “And I wish you good fortune, both for this Task and the rest of the Tournament. Now I’m afraid....”

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Neville didn’t like the games of the Winter Ball.

No one explained the rules, and once he understood them, they changed.

The Winter Ball’s dinner had been bad enough. For some mystery, the wizards and witches he shared a table didn’t speak English, French, Italian, or any dialect he was aware of. Neville thought they may have been Prussian, but it was a guess, nothing more. The food had been horribly spicy too, it still continued to burn his tongue no matter how much he drank or how many of pieces of bread he ate.

The end of this game he was still scratching his head about had provided no relief. And the reason for that could be summed-up in one word: Lavender.

He really, really should have found a date before Alexandra Potter let this blonde-haired gossiper take a Portkey to the Scuola Regina.

Or he should have said no.

Or he should have fled.

Yes, fleeing was more and more sounding like the perfect plan.

His feet hurt. His arms hurt. His legs hurt.

Compared to dancing with Lavender, playing Quidditch was extremely easy.

Fortunately, like all bad things, it ended.

And as they finally left the dance floor, Neville and his overexcited ‘partner’ found themselves somehow pushed towards the Champion of Hogwarts who had engineered his doom for today.

Anything hurtful the future Lord Longbottom might have said would have to wait, for the Exiled Queen wasn’t alone.

“Enjoying the evening, Gryffindor Champion?” It was very strange to see her with red hair and blue eyes, but the pose and the sheer power the Champion of Ravenclaw possessed made sure the ‘disguise’ was extremely easy to see through.

“Yes, we’re enjoying a lot this Ball, thank you Alexandra!” Lavender answered with her usual excitation.”

“That’s good...I guess.” The Ravenclaw student didn’t look fooled by his face trying to simulate joy. “I’m presenting you Minister Armand Delacour of France...and his youngest daughter Gabrielle.”

“Minister,” Neville cleared his throat before politely nodding and presenting his respects, “Mademoiselle Gabrielle.”

Even if he had not been told this was the sister of the older Light Champion, the resemblance would have been evident with a single glance. Gabrielle Delacour had to be eleven or twelve, but she very much was a miniature copy of Fleur, perfect blonde Veela hair and perfect blue eyes.

At the moment, though, Neville’s words might as well not been uttered, since all the attention of the Champion’s sister was directed at Alexandra Potter.

“You hurt my sister! I won’t forgive you!”

“Gabrielle!” the Minister’s intervention was stern, but his daughter didn’t show any sign of contrition. “You promised me you would behave!”

“You hurt my sister,” the girl who had to be just old enough to be admitted to Beauxbatons repeated in a far more conversational tone.

“Such wasn’t my intention, I assure you,” Alexandra Potter looked very much...bored as she answered flawlessly in French.

“You lie.”

“I don’t.” It was almost comical. The Dark Champion was very much a Winter Queen. She looked invulnerable and indomitable. And Gabrielle Delacour was very, very small compared to her. “Your sister tried to kill me twice. I definitely did my best to return the favour.”

“The third time-“

“If your sister challenges me a third time, I will make sure her ashes will go directly to the graveyard. Now go, little witch. Your father and I have important things to discuss.”

Gabrielle Delacour shivered, and suddenly seemed to acknowledge how much trouble promised to pile up on her head. She ran away, likely to find her mother or one of her relatives.

“I’m very sorry about her poor behaviour.” Minister Armand Delacour apologised. “I shouldn’t have indulged her, but her semester grades were excellent, and I have been too indulgent with her.”

“If you say so,” the four words sounded neutral, but they weren’t.

The French leader immediately noticed, and there was no expression of surprise on his face when he spoke again.

“You are not convinced of the purity of my intentions.”

“Your eldest daughter is part of an organisation which has made its goal to kill me for the extraordinary crime of being alive, Minister. Your youngest daughter is spoiled and sounds extremely judgemental...and unable to recognise when she’s threading on dangerous grounds.”

“Fleur and she are very close. She took very badly her terrible injuries after the First Task.”

“Stop staring at her,” Lavender hissed in his ear. “This is not our problem. Let’s go find another conversation.”

“One minute...”

“If you say so, Minister. Excuse me if I have my doubts. The recent behaviour of Fleur Delacour does not give me great optimism.”

“Even by showing some tolerance towards the Champions of different ideologies?” the father of the Champion of Life asked rhetorically.

Alexandra Potter was visibly unconvinced, but Neville couldn’t follow the conversation, not when Lavender was dragging him away.

“The only valid reason why she might be able to tolerate Lyudmila Romanov is if the Tsar’s daughter had a ritual or two to remove her scars and help her heal the damage I gave her on early November. I am not convinced...”

Neville felt it, then. The unmistakable aura of evil darkness was there.

And as he turned his eyes, he could see him. He looked like a bald man with a nose a bit too big. He was the twin of the Archmage of the Light.

Neville wanted to say something, but Lavender continued to grip his arm so powerfully he was afraid she was going to mutilate him.

The Champion of Fate had no choice but to accept his destiny and disappear into the massive crowd of wizards and witches.

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Speaking with the French Minister had been...interesting.

There was good news. Unless the Delacour patriarch was a fantastic good actor – which Alexandra alas couldn’t dismiss, since politics required the same orator skills as those of theatre players – he wasn’t a member of the Army of Light or the Trinity.

The bad news...he loved his daughters, and appeared to have little control over them.

And evidently, this left her without any idea how Fleur Delacour had been recruited. Was it the Veela’s mother? Was it a circle of fanatics hidden within the ranks of Beauxbatons’ teachers? As Henri de Condé was another Light Champion coming from the same school, Alexandra had the feeling it could be the case.

The question would be how to-

“**You should not frown so much, Champion of Death**.”

The voice took her by surprise, and it was difficult to keep her calm.

Somehow, the Morrigan Champion did it.

Come on, the Queen was present for the dinner, and now the King was here too? Couldn’t he go...annoy Dumbledore and the other Light mages present?

“Why not, Lord? I was wondering when you were going to activate another Seal during this cold nice of Solstice.”

“**In this case, let me reassure you**, **Champion Potter**,” the Avatar of Darkness gave her a thin smile. “**It is not my plan to activate any Seal or organise something dangerous and explosive tonight**. **When the Dark Powers are able to influence our reality so much, it is not wise to create disturbances of any kind**.”

This made sense...but then the Seal was in part using magic and deeds which didn’t belong into the fabric of this world. In Alexandra’s opinion, it was like drinking two glasses of champagne or three; the difference wasn’t that important...but she wasn’t an expert. The King of the Exchequer, however, had forgotten more magical lore than she ever learned by heart in the last four years.

“I would have thought you would not be displeased by the fact the Light’s influence would be diminished into nonexistence, Lord Osiris.”

“**I am not. But I am not blind either to the hubris of the Dark Powers and their Champions. For as long as the current status quo has existed, the wizards and witches who raised the shadowy banners have desired to break their chains and become the new masters. It is this ambition which has allowed us to survive. It is this ambition which might doom us before the end, like stagnation will be the Light’s downfall.**”

There were many ways to interpret this message, and none of them were good. Was it a warning that as her powers grew, Alexandra might become someone she wouldn’t recognise in a mirror right now? Or was it an admission that the King of the Exchequer might not be able to control his subordinates when his plans for the Tournament were over?

“What are you after, oh Lord of Darkness?” The Basilisk Slayer asked after a long silence. “Who do you want to win the Tournament?”

“**My dear Champion, I want only the most skilled and talented wizard...or witch...to win this interschool competition. I am a great believer in a meritocratic society**.”

Okay, now Alexandra was sure the King of the Exchequer was having a good laugh at her expense. Not only he hadn’t answered the first question, but the second was just nonsense. His organisation of Dark Lords didn’t spend millions of Galleons in infrastructures, prizes, and festivities, just for the pleasure of watching a Light Champion be handed the victor’s trophy at the end.

“You must hate Britain, then.”

The current political system under Fudge was a lot of things, but you couldn’t say it was meritocratic with a straight face.

“**Hate is such a strong word**.” The Avatar of Darkness commented idly. “**I am singularly unimpressed by the society of mediocrity and narrow-minded fools that has been bred on your rainy islands for the last decades. They could have risen to be the leaders of Europe, and instead have turned out to be a symbol of its failures**.”

“You are calling Albus Dumbledore and Tom Riddle failures.” It would be funny to say it to their faces...if a bit risky.

“**Because they are**.” The King of the Exchequer bluntly declared. “**I can understand opposing my ideals, though it doesn’t stop me from killing them. Drowning yourself in mediocrity and encouraging generations of young mages to do the same is however inexcusable and the punishment will match their insolent decadence**.”

Why did Alexandra have a feeling that the Headmaster of Hogwarts and ‘You-Know-Who’ were going to be in dire straits to live past the end of the European Magical Tournament?

Alexandra opened her mouth to ask another question about the whole ‘Avatar’ sibling relationship, but the Judges chose this moment to evacuate the dance floor. Thirty seconds later, the enchanted floor was transformed into a skating rink.

So that was why her shoes had so many enchantments upon them.

“**The evening festivities must continue**.”

And yes, Alexandra was sure now the King of the Exchequer was going to laugh at their discomfort the moment no Champion could hear him...

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The Champions of the Light and the Dark were absolute monsters when it came to magical power.

Astrid Sverre didn’t think there was a single person in the ballroom which would disagree with her.

No one would also argue with the Durmstrang female student that most of the sixteen Champions couldn’t skate on ice even if their life was at stake.

“Watch where you’re going! No! Not on the left!”

“Out of my way, Malatesti!”

“Don’t give me orders, De Condé!”

The ice rink was...chaos. Yes, it was sheer chaos.

To be fair, it wasn’t just the Champions who didn’t know to glide on the transformed ballroom floor. Astrid saw two boys of Beauxbatons collide rather violently with one of the Hogwarts girls. And it was a very good thing they were soft protections at the edge of the skating zone, because every two seconds, someone was slamming into them.

“Sforza, evade! Evade!”

“Don’t turn like that! I am....no! No!”

“You are an ostrich mounted on skates! Let me show you what a professional does!”

Romeo Malatesti had one more time missed an opportunity to shut up. As he tried once more a ridiculously complicated acrobatic figure in the air, all he achieved was an impressive fall which led him to push a group of Succubi directly into the blue-coloured protection mattresses.

Needless to say, the winged witches of the Scuola Regina didn’t like that at all, and whatever the Champion of Ares said, it was visibly not enough to avoid being hexed.

“Idiots,” the Dark Queen sighed as she munched some sweets grabbed from one of the ‘midnight buffets’ summoned by the school cooks a few minutes ago. She seemed to have found her unlike partner somewhere along the way.

“You know, this may be the true challenge to gain the Winter Ball’s Tournament Clue,” Astrid remarked neutrally. “You aren’t going to win anything by standing here.”

But the Champion of Durmstrang shook immediately her head in a silent ‘no’.

“Two points why I’m not going to make a fool of myself on the ice. First, I sincerely doubt there is a Tournament Clue to be found tonight. I analysed what the Judges said and what could be construed as a secret message, and I didn’t find anything. Moreover, there aren’t any caches to reveal a prize for the winner of this skating disaster. And for a skating competition, you need Judges and individual performances, unless you want a race. There are none here.”

“That sounds...reasonable.” The Norwegian witch acknowledged. “And the second point?”

Lyudmila Romanov didn’t answer. Her expressions were sometimes vicious, sometimes filled with anger, but it wasn’t usual to see her like that, seated in an immobile stance which would have been more fitting for a statue than a human being.

“The second point?”

“I promise I would never don again my ice skates unless *he* apologised.” The Champion of Chaos growled in a sound which resonated like the death knell of a world. “I will not break this promise.”

“He?” Astrid tried to think about who the Dark Queen could refer to, and suddenly as her mind was cloudy, drinking the good wine in large quantities did not sound like a good idea anymore. “Your skating teacher?”

“Oh no, I murdered this fool. And the one *he* tried to hire after that.”

This left...oh hell. Lyudmila was speaking about the Tsar. She was speaking about her father...and the hatred didn’t sound fake at all.

Suddenly, the rumours of having an aspiring Dark Lady wishing to skip the inheritance claim a bit did not sound so outrageous anymore.

“Sforza is a natural when it comes to skating,” and suddenly the dark moment was gone, as if nothing had happened in the last minutes.

“Yes,” Astrid smiled, relieved the conversation was going in a far less dangerous direction. “She clearly has experience when it comes to dances, be they on solid ground or on ice.”

Unlike some other Champions, the Sverre Heiress didn’t say. Her cousin, like most of the Hogwarts Champions, was doubtlessly a novice trying to not collide with everyone.

The Succubus Champion, on the other hand...she was the incarnation of grace on ice. And no, it wasn’t a joke or a pun.

“If she is as talented skating as she is brewing Potions, this Venetian girl will be trouble for the next Task.”

“She was already troublesome during the last two Tasks. It’s her fault the final of the Second wasn’t as spectacular as it should be.”

Astrid simply rolled her eyes. The Dark Queen was back, and wanted to pick a fight.

“Don’t worry, I have a plan to make sure Lust will acknowledge that no matter her gifts, I can dominate her when and where I wish.”

“Weren’t you saying the same thing about Frode Falk yesterday?”

“I can multitask, Heiress Sverre...and I have a lot of imagination, when it comes to mixing Alchemical reagents and Potions.”

Well, that didn’t sound ominous at all...

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Alexandra was annoyed. Yes, let’s go with ‘annoyed’.

“Hey for a beginner, that’s relatively good ice skating!” Susan ‘congratulated’ her.

“I fell twice on my...I fell twice, oh great and stable Badger,” because of course, her girlfriend had stayed well outside the ice rink.

“Malatesti fell at least a dozen times!”

“It’s the playboy of War. He’s still trying to realise he has no brain,” Alexandra said ironically. “Being compared to him is not good for my ego.”

“You will get better. If you’re interested, I’m sure we will be able to open a club at Hogwarts. The Black Lake is always frozen for two to three months, we could use to our advantage.”

“That’s an idea.” The Ravenclaw Champion answered reluctantly.

 Ice skating or no ice skating, there was no denying that Hogwarts as a school should offer way more activities than it currently did. The students of Beauxbatons, the Scuola Regina, and Durmstrang constantly boasted about learning countless things like arts, languages, Duelling, or future jobs. By comparison, the education provided by Dumbledore was...lacklustre. It did the job if your only goal in life was to pass the OWLs and NEWTs, sure enough, but when it came to the rest...

“I’ve looked like you asked me. I didn’t any sign of a Tournament Clue. And the Judges haven’t handed anything to Lucrezia Sforza, despite her being by far the best dancer on ice of all the Champions.

“We must have missed something.” Alexandra watched the entire ballroom for anything significant happening. Alas, for now, the only ‘significant’ event offering itself to her eyes was that Fleur Delacour had abandoned the company of Lyudmila Romanov, and was now fleeing the Winter Ball’s ballroom accompanied by her family. “Perhaps it is outside this hall?”

“We have instructions not to leave the ballroom until the Succubus Headmistress gives out her speech, or we’re willing to go back to our villas for the rest of the night, Alex.”

“Ah,” the Potter Heiress grimaced. “Okay, I’m ready to admit I have no idea what to look for. Assuming there is something we have to look for.”

“The Judges aren’t making it easy for any of you, to be sure,” her girlfriend agreed. “And their previous choices were particularly sadistic. And one can’t forget they’re mixing the beautiful and the ugly. Few people would have the idea to offer the ‘Egg of Cleopatra’ and then a dangerous and smelly pig!”

“It was a boar, Susan,” Alexandra declared absently.

“Pig, boar, this is the same, it was an insult after the egg-“

Ah yes, the beautiful egg Lyudmila Romanov was no doubt using as a trophy in her villa. The egg which-

Oh, no.

“No...the bastards...even they wouldn’t have the audacity to do *that*...”

It was...it was...the Pysanky eggs were similar to the Easter eggs which appeared in non-magical tradition after the Statute.

They were intended as gifts.

And everyone had missed it.

Immediately, Alexandra began to look around the abandoned tables which had been levitated against the walls to increase the space available. But they were all empty, naturally.

The furniture surrounding the ice rink had none of them, obviously, otherwise someone would have broken them.

Damn it, damn it...

“Alex?”

“I just realised the Judges are indeed sadists who are hiding their deviousness perfectly,” the Hydra Animagus gritted her teeth as she transformed her eyes into those of her inner animal to improve her searching chances. “But it may be too-“

She was about to say ‘it may be too late’, but by some turn of Fate...there still was a table which had not been cleared.

The reason for this anomaly was that it was the table the two Headmasters and two Headmistresses of the four schools were in some deep conversation...and pretending unconvincingly they were the best of friends, of course.

There was a gold-and-red egg at the centre of this round table. And yes, there was nowhere else.

“Susan, I’m abandoning you for a couple of minutes....”

Kissing her currently green-eyed girlfriend, Alexandra tried to sprint as fast as she could. It was...difficult. Poliakov, the Champion of Confusion, was completely drunk and nearly made her fall as she went near him.

All in all, as the alcohol had evaporated a lot of the self-control of the students, crossing the ballroom should have been considered an obstacle course in its own right. But she did it...and just in time, as more Scuola Regina personnel seemed to arrive to remove this table; the leaders of the four schools were abandoning their seats.

“Ah, Champion Potter! Spending a good evening?”

“It is a very pleasing Winter Ball, thank you Headmistress Sforza!”

“My dear girl-“ Alexandra ignored Dumbledore. It wasn’t like he had anything interesting to say.

“Accio Pysanka!”

Her spell was wandless, and the precision wouldn’t have impressed Flitwick, but the gold-and-red egg flew directly in her right hand.

“Should we be impressed by your magical performance, Champion?” The High Master of Durmstrang asked snidely. Alexandra fought off the urge to strangle him with his intestines. The Death Eater wasn’t worth it.

“No. You should be impressed I did that. Cleopatra!” And as she uttered the magical password, the shell of the egg seemed to transform in a firework display. There was a shower of gold and crimson, and the egg lost all its colour.

Then the firework became a projection of snow and ice.

When it was over, the Pysanka egg had taken a crystalline appearance...and it had gained a mechanical lock to open it too.

The ‘why a lock?’ was obvious. Inside the egg, Alexandra could perceive a miniature model of a very big and complex castle.

“It seems,” Judge Mohammed ben Qassim, who had waited silently behind her, “Champion Alexandra Potter has been the only one to find the Tournament Clue of this Winter Ball! We award her one Tournament Point for this achievement!”

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“I can’t believe it...”

Alexandra Potter had found the Tournament Clue...again, since she had already solved the cipher for the Second Task before.

“Well, she isn’t resting on her laurels,” Lavender quipped.

Neville frowned.

“Lavender, I am sorry...”

“No, you’re not.” The blonde-haired Gryffindor promptly reminded him. “But that’s fine. I was able to participate as a Champion’s date during the Winter Ball of the Scuola Regina. And with Parvati here, I’m sure we will have enough rumours for the next three months once we return to school!”

“Parvati was here?” Neville hadn’t seen her anywhere unless-

“I thought you would have recognised her to Draco Malfoy’s arm,” the pink-clad terror who had crippled his arm in a single evening informed him.

The Boy-Who-Lived was very glad he wasn’t drinking anything at the moment, because he was sure he would have spat everything in his mouth, no matter how many wizards and witches were in the vicinity.

If he coughed violently after that revelation, no one could blame him, right? Right?

Unfortunately, as far as potentially apocalyptic announcements were mentioned, it wasn’t over.

While he wasn’t watching, Alexandra Potter had walked towards the Weasley Twins. And the two pranksters were now standing to attention.

“Consider this your mobilisation’s advance warning. I need your services for the next week.”

“Yes, Glorious Dark Lady!” the orange-haired and orange-robed menaces replied in perfect unity.

**Author’s note**:

Wow, the Winter Ball is over. This was a...surprisingly difficult chapter to write. I hope everyone will enjoy it nonetheless.

The next chapter will be...roll drums...*Third Task*.

Yes, it’s time to accelerate the mayhem. The attack of the citadel must proceed, and there are going to be a lot of shenanigans, that much I can promise.

For in the immortal words of some dead man long gone, if you’re not trying to cheat, then you’re not trying hard enough.

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