**Chapter 111**

**Masked Ball**

"*Our non-magical counterparts often say that war is the continuation of policy with other means. This is blatantly false, of course, and I think that with the Statute gone, they are going to learn the truth of things very quickly. The truth? The truth is that any magical politician is perfectly capable of shedding a sea of blood on its own without beginning a war*..." Anonymous Exchequer mage, 1995.

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

Alexandra would lie if she said she didn't feel a certain amount of relief when the multitude of masks, shoes, and other accessories were magically propelled towards other rooms.

"I should have your costume ready on time." Lady Stella Zabini stared at her with an expression the Champion of Death had learned to know all too well. "Don't be late."

"I won't," the Ravenclaw witch swore. "Changelina, Dignitary costume without the mask, please."

Immediately, the magical artefact replaced the very bland clothes used for the 'costume testing' with long red robes that hid her body from view. There were red robes, red gloves, red boots...and of course it wouldn't be the Carnival without a near-ridiculous tall red hat.

"Extremely useful, this Changelina," her magical guardian gave her a playful smirk. "Do you know if those parties who invented it have one available to purchase?"

Alexandra blinked. For most people, the obvious answer would have been 'you can't afford it, stop dreaming', but Stella Zabini obviously wasn't most people. The Black Widow – who indeed was a husband-killing Lamia – had the funds to buy a Changelina, and given her enormous collection of clothes, both the necessity and the motivation to acquire one.

"I will check again with House Sforza, Stella," Alexandra replied prudently, "but I was given to understand that there was a large queue when it came to obtain one. The heavily complex process of creation for a Changelina ensures there is only an extremely limited number of them available for purchase every year."

"Too bad," the Lady of House Zabini smiled, showing no disappointment, having evidently expected something like this. "It would have been formidable, and not only for Carnivals and great events like the Ministry receptions."

"It is," Alexandra nodded, before admitting in a whisper the next words, "and I'm very glad I was able to keep it undamaged in the last battles."

"That is a good thing, but please never forget that the most precious thing is your life, Alexandra."

The memories flashed back, of her being at the nonexistent mercy of the Archmage.

Alexandra shivered.

"I didn't forget. But I can't promise I will have a... less adventurous lifestyle."

"Then take a lot of support with you. The battle of the Plaza di San Marco was a special case, I understand... but you don't have to fight all the battles yourself."

"I... yes, Stella." The young witch winced. "You were saying a few things about politics before the costume testing?"

Her magical guardian looked at her sardonically for a few seconds before shaking her head.

"There is going to be an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot tomorrow morning. Many things will be debated...the end of the Statute, the wishes of the non-magical government of London to arrest one Albus Dumbledore, and the downfall of Fudge, just to begin with."

Alexandra let a huff escape her lips.

"Why do I feel like that's just the beginning of the trouble?"

"Because you are an intelligent young witch," her magical guardian immediately replied, "the Prime Minister has also extended an invitation for you, on behalf of the Queen. You have also several meetings to attend after that..."

"All in London?"

"For tomorrow, all of them will be in London," Stella Zabini confirmed, before pausing to watch her in concern. "If you want to discard your plans that were formulated before the Tournament, I will of course understand. You are still young, and the end of the Statute is a mess no one should have to deal with..."

"The urge exists to say the Wizengamot, the Ministry, and Dumbledore are responsible for this mess," the last witch to hold the Potter name breathed out. "But... this is an opportunity that won't come again."

"It likely won't," her guardian recognised honestly. "While the Wizengamot has few capable senior leaders, and Fudge was a cowardly idiot who refused to see the truth before it smacked him in the face... new leaders will emerge, one way or another."

The green-eyed Champion hesitated.

It was tempting... too tempting. There was an Apprenticeship waiting for her at the end of the year. It was going to be hell on her free time, so adding one more job was going to lead her to running from fire to fire in order to ensure Britain and Europe didn't go down in flames.

But wasn't that exactly what she had already done in the last days?

At least if she went ahead, Alexandra would have governmental support, both from the magical and the non-magical side...

"We go ahead with the plan," the Champion of Death said quietly, but with a voice filled with steel and determination. "And I stand by my choices."

"Then I am going to send the owls. There is a problem to remove however."

"One of Fudge's cronies?" Alexandra asked, internally sighing. That there were morons serving the ex-Minister of Magic was not that surprising, but it was frustrating-

"No, not Fudge. The end of the Statute has had unpleasant consequences for the non-magical population of Nottingham."

"Oh," Alexandra let her teeth transform into fangs, "*that* problem."

**21 February 1995, Venice**

Venice had changed.

It was still crowded, obviously. Many participants had gone, but now that the city was clearly and unquestionably 'magical', there were many new ones who had taken their place.

Everyone had to be in costume. For as long as the Carnival lasted – that was to say, until tomorrow – masks and impressive disguises were the norm.

So at first sight, you could be mistaken to think Venice was enjoying the days of the pre-Statute for a few seconds.

Then you saw some wizards and witches demonstrating mock duels in front of hundreds of spectators, and this illusion broke.

No matter how good the Weasley Twins were, no one in the Night Court had been able to find out a way to sell magical sweets in the markets of the city... until now.

Without the need to hide, the wizards and witches were returning to their usual behaviour... and since it was a Carnival, the moves were often flamboyant. Oriental mages were debating with their birds of prey on their shoulders, and while some were clearly falcons or eagles, others were clearly magical species unknown to the public at large.

You could take a gondola, sure. Or you could use an authentic sea chariot, towed by four trained dolphins. You just had to pay the proper offering to the Power of Water for the run... if you didn't, the rain increased upon your head until you did.

A lot of the medieval-looking lampposts had been refurbished to be compatible with the eternal embers of the volcano nearby, with the benediction of the Power of Fire. It had been unavoidable, for without the appropriate warding – like those House Sforza and a few other very wealthy magical families had – electricity was getting... extremely unreliable now.

Venice was very different.

It was refreshing, exhilarating... and Alexandra knew she wouldn't stay here.

For as long as the Carnival lasted, the Champion of Death could feel the Powers of Water and Fire were merely watching her, observing but not judging her actions... but if she stayed too long, their tolerance would shift into something else.

Venice was imbued with the magic of Powers which had nothing to do with the Dark anymore… and although it was only a guess, Alexandra felt that they were going to protect their 'investment'.

Still, the Venetian Carnival would likely be considered a time of truce every year... something to ask Lucrezia later assuredly.

The Ravenclaw witch searched for several minutes... and while she didn't find a certain Champion, Alexandra found out something that made her cackle.

They were on the roofs of Venice. They had used a flying broom to get there, clearly. They had hidden behind a few spells to not receive any attention.

But to escape her eyes, it had not been enough.

Alexandra teleported on the roof... and they didn't see her coming.

"BOO!"

"This isn't...ALEX!"

"Hi, Hermione," the Hydra Animagus called her friend with a big smile. "And **if** isn't it my good friend Viktor Krum? I was just checking the roofs, and I must remark there are hostels where kissing of that nature-"

"ALEX!"

"Yes, that's my name," the Champion of Ravenclaw said cheerfully while dispelling all the enchantments on the roof. Predictably, the noise attracted plenty of spectators immediately. "I must say-"

Hermione tried to curse her. She missed, though Alexandra had to jump... and land elegantly in the streets, with Atalanta soon landing on her shoulder.

"I did say vengeance would be mine, remember? Ciao, lovebirds! Don't do anything the spectators might disapprove of!"

Hermione considered cursing her with more spells, but given the possible number of targets she could hit in the streets, she relented... and Alexandra rushed away cackling, with her loyal bird companion hooting loudly.

"You have a strange sense of humour... cousin."

"Oh, hi, cousin," Alexandra replied in good humour. "Nice costume."

Astrid Sverre had decided to wear a majestic blue costume of 'Winter Queen' today, with a sceptre of ice and all the accessories, many of them magical artefacts, by the looks of it.

"Thank you... but don't try to change the subject."

"I can have my fun too? No?"

Her ears didn't miss the loud sigh.

"Sometimes, I wonder if you shouldn't have been the Champion of Chaos. You seem like you would thrive in it."

"Nah, save on a few occasions, I assure you I like orderly things," the British-born student promptly countered. "Besides, if I was Chaos, that would mean your fearsome Dark Queen would be Death incarnate."

"Err... a good point." Astrid shook her head very fast, for some reason...

"And since I mentioned the wolf, so to speak... where is Lyudmila, cousin? I want to speak about important subjects with her, and I'm unable to sense her magic... though with all the Water and Fire influence, my sensing ability inside Venice is considerably restrained."

"Ah yes... about that..."

You didn't need to be a genius to know the 'Ice Queen' was very ill-at-ease.

And in the next seconds, something passed beyond the Veil. Something... or someone.

"Let me guess: she used an island away from the main Carnival activities to bury a problem... literally and metaphorically?"

**21 February 1995, an island in the northern lagoon of Venice**

There was something formidably ironic about the two last Champions of the Dark choosing costumes of bright colours today.

At least that was Astrid's opinion, and so far, she had seen nothing to change her mind.

Lyudmila Romanov had chosen a disguise of a bright silver colour, with a pale blue mask, which made her look like a radiant statue of silver, minus the blue additions.

Her cousin was clad entirely in flashy red, with a golden mask to seal the deal.

And for her peace of mind, the Sverre Heiress decided to avoid looking too much at the two corpses which had been thrown into hastily and magically-dug graves.

"Assassins?" Alexandra Potter asked for them both.

"Yes," the Dark Queen bared her fangs. "The Tsar is not one to wait when one disobeys him. He sent two of his best killers."

"It clearly wasn't enough."

"Clearly not," Lyudmila made a sound which was most likely one of annoyance. "Seriously, I'm almost insulted. Those two? I could have dealt with them four years ago, hands tied. Now they are just nuisances, and not the amusing kind."

"Perhaps all the other assassins are busy, with the situation in Russia and everything involving the end of the Statute."

"Perhaps," the Fenrir Animagus growled unconvinced. "But you didn't come here to discuss my performance against assassins, Death. And I don't think you want me to be your partner for the Ball tonight. You have that fiery redhead for that."

It would be really funny to see the expression of her cousin behind the mask, because Astrid was ready to bet Alexandra Potter had blushed deeply after those words.

"Your deductions are completely accurate," the young Champion replied after a few seconds. "This isn't about tonight. This is about a problem I'd been made aware of some months ago, but I've refrained from intervening in until now. I had no reason to as long as a certain faction was well aware of the limits."

"And this is no longer the case?"

"Some people," there was no trace of amusement, "evidently think the end of the Statute is the excuse they've been waiting centuries for."

"And?" Astrid knew the Dark Queen enough to know when she was interested.

"And this organisation, which we will call *Coven*, has decided to organise a grand Masquerade. One of the reasons they're doing it is so that the participants may gorge themselves on the *food*. The other big reason is an insult to Death and the Carnival taking place here. They believe themselves to be out of anyone's reach. They believe they are going to challenge wizards and all sources of opposition, secure in their underground lair."

"That sounds like incredible arrogance," Loki's Chosen nodded in approval. "And I know what I'm talking about. What do you intend to do... Alexandra?"

"I intend to invite myself to the Masquerade."

Lyudmila looked at her cousin for a couple of seconds... and then burst into laughter.

"Are we invited?" the Dark Queen managed to ask between two chuckles.

"That," the former Night Queen of the Fourth Task replied sarcastically, "is the wrong question."

"Yes, I suppose it is." A few more chuckles escaped the lips of Lyudmila before she grew serious again. "Yes... so the right questions are me asking how do you intend to go through the Thaumaturgy protections they will have erected to prevent any... unfriendly Champions from inviting herself to the Masquerade? And why do you need me?"

"To answer your second question, I was told by my guardian to bring adequate support wherever I go now. You are more than adequate."

"That's true," Lyudmila admitted without a hint of humility. "And my first question?"

"I know someone who can be convinced to give us an invitation for the right price."

**21 February 1995, somewhere inside the forest of Nottingham, England**

Peter Pettigrew loved the forest.

It was welcoming, no matter how much morning mist there was.

It was filled with life.

It gave him serenity, no matter how many bad things the Vampire Coven that paid for his services committed while he was away.

Peter would love to say he was greeting every morning, but honestly he didn't. The Rat Animagus was extremely lazy, and being forced to stay awake many nights ensured he usually slept through the sunrise even when his services weren't required.

But given the circumstances, Peter thought-

The wind changed, and suddenly his senses were engulfed by a terrifying assault of smell and magic.

An assault which smelt of terrifying predators, and something that let the rat in him squeak.

Snakes.

Peter was smelling snakes and-

It was more a reflex than a conscious decision to Apparate away.

Except it didn't work.

The feet of the former Gryffindor stayed on the forest trail, no matter how hard he thought of the three 'Ds', or how forceful he was with his magic.

One of his hands went to his belt to activate his Portkey...which was torn away to land in an open red glove.

"Peter Pettigrew."

"You have me at a disadvantage, I'm sure-"

The smell of snake grew ever more powerful... and the red-hooded figure removed a golden mask.

This time, Peter had no difficulty recognising the witch he faced, though of course the teenager was older than she had been when they met last time.

"Alexandra Potter... the Lightning Empress."

The green-eyed girl raised an interested eyebrow after he uttered the words.

"That's a new one. I've heard 'Sword of Death', 'Champion', and 'Basilisk Slayer'... 'Lightning Empress', that's definitely new."

"If you don't want it," Peter drawled, "maybe it would be useful to stop killing people right and left with elemental lightning spells."

"I will take it into consideration."

The green eyes did not perfectly match her mother's, but they were extremely close...

"Not that I'm displeased to see you in this charming forest, but what are you doing here... Champion of Death?"

Peter had a dark guess as to why she was here, alas.

"I think you know why, oh last of the Marauders. Twenty-six dead. Fifty-nine men and women dragged away from their homes to participate in this cruel Masquerade before playing the role of *sustenance*. And this is only for the last two days."

"They... Coven Elder Victor Aemillius sees no reason to hide since the Statute is dead."

"Oh, I'm sure I can give him a reason," the young green-eyed girl replied with a smirk.

Unless you were an idiot, you couldn't miss the threat.

"The Morrigan is very displeased. *I* am very displeased," the witch responsible for the final destruction of Azkaban and half of the destruction that happened on Westminster Bridge said coldly. "It took many months of negotiations for my guardian and other factions to arrive at an accord with the Soul Drinkers Coven. I am not happy with the actions of the Shadow Blades."

Peter Pettigrew tried... to shrug as calmly as possible.

"Not knowing your plans or those of your Power, I can only say I did not give the order, and I wasn't informed of most of the bloody deeds until they were done. The vampires didn't ask for my opinion, and they didn't care what I thought in the first place. I'm an Animagus they hire for complicated operations, not a member of their Coven."

"I know. That's why I came here today. I want to know what lies behind the first layer of defences. I want to know how the vampiric blood magic protects their headquarters-lair."

Peter suddenly had an urge to ask her if she was serious, but the emotionless expression made the question redundant. Yes, the daughter of Lily Potter was deadly serious.

"What do you want to do once inside?" the Rat Animagus asked weakly. "You won't be able to hide what you are. The Coven Elders' senses are better than mine, they will immediately know something is wrong."

"I intend to give them an ultimatum. They live by my rules, or they will die by them. The Soul Drinkers Coven found them acceptable, and if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for the Shadow Blades."

If it hadn't come from a Champion who had faced Dumbledore fearlessly on the Westminster Bridge... Peter would have said it was stupidity or naivety.

But Alexandra Potter was not... that. He could see it in her green eyes. The Sword of Death knew perfectly well how the message was going to be received. She just didn't care about the Shadow Blades' feelings.

"Just by inviting yourself inside their refuge... and disturbing a Masquerade, of course... the ultimatum will be rejected."

There wasn't any immediate counter... why wasn't he surprised?

"And they will want my death if I give you the information you want."

Once again, the eyebrows moved.

And there was definitely something reptilian, something... terrifyingly lethal waiting behind the emotionless mask.

It was all the confirmation Peter needed to know what he had dreaded for the last seconds. If the Shadow Blades...

"They are Vampiri Orientem, and you won't have the sunlight with you."

"Why does anyone ever think that because I'm unable to cast Light spells, I am fundamentally unable to deal with Dark threats?" the young witch asked whimsically.

Peter sighed.

"You drive hard bargains... like your mother."

"I can give you an amnesty tomorrow, signed by the Minister of Magic. Pardon for your crimes, some gold, and I give you a position that you should enjoy."

Yes, definitely Lily's daughter... including the most annoying 'quality' of knowing things you had no idea about. To be sure, Peter had not visited the Minister of Magic in a while... but he had heard of Fudge's latest 'political issues'.

This likely meant there would be a new Minister tomorrow... and the question was up to him if he would live that long.

"What do you want to know exactly?" the last of the Marauders asked after a long moment of reflexion. "And please keep in mind that the more you ask, the greater reward I will expect in the next days..."

The smile he received was absolutely not reassuring.

"Well, since we have to start with the basics... how much did the Shadow Blades Coven prepare against Hieroglyph Galdr and Lokk? Does their Thaumaturgy function on a seven Arithmantic base?"

"Err..." Peter Pettigrew knew it wasn't exactly the most extraordinary reply in Animagus history... but what do you say when you have the realisation you're really facing a magical prodigy? And a prodigy that likely could do things at thirteen that you didn't master well after your NEWTs...

**21 February 1995, Headquarters of the Shadow Blades Coven, Nottingham**

The moment Alexandra was through the Thaumaturgy and the other defences counting as 'wards', she was sure of one thing.

The vampiric taste in decoration was awful.

All of it was Gothic-themed. All of it was horrible, no matter how many tons of precious metal had been sunk in it.

The building had been built recently, that much the Basilisk Slayer knew, but there was so much Gothic theme and gloomy decorations that it really didn't feel like it.

"We inform you that you are late, Lady, the Masquerade began- Hey, you aren't on the list of invitees!"

The wererat in front of her had squeaked the last words... making Alexandra smile and bare miniature Hydra fangs.

"No, I'm not."

"ALERT! ENE-"

"Silencio Maxima! Vindicta Silencio Umbra!"

The wererats shouted and screamed all at the same time to alert their masters.

It was in vain. Her spell may not have been perfect, but it had been good enough to silence them: not only was every sound out of their mouths silent, but even the sounds they might create by running or slamming chandeliers against the walls were inaudible.

Alexandra sighed and took a step to the right.

"Let me allow you to present Lyudmila Romanov, wererats. She is the Archduchess of Novgorod, the Champion of Loki and Chaos... and she is really a very bad Dark Witch."

"I love the introduction. Can we do it again?" the Champion of Loki chuckled.

"No." Alexandra gave a pitying look to the wererats. "You can submit, or you can choose to fight her. Should you choose the second option... you will die."

Before the end of her sentence, most wererats had already begun to transform, except two of them. The latter were running towards the stairs which led to the underground sections of the Shadow Blades headquarters.

"So be it. Don't take too long, Chaos."

"Please, Death. This is just going to be the preliminary for the main event."

Alexandra teleported behind the wererats' formation, and rushed in pursuit of the fleeing wererats.

There were sounds of battle behind her, mostly the other Dark Champion having fun... ah, well. The skinchangers had their chance.

The first wererat was easy to catch.

The second was far less so. Many young vampires and wererats threw themselves at her and imposed a delay. But it only gave her fleeing opponent a minute of salvation, which the skinchanger used to run into the entrails of the manor. When she caught up, the greater difficulty was finding a good angle of attack. In the end, it took a well-adjusted Reducto to send him through ancient wooden doors which looked expensive... and directly into a crowded ballroom where some opera music had been sung and played.

It went without saying that all heads turned in her direction immediately.

Oops.

That was... not really the plan, but when did the world care about her plans? It was time to improvise.

"I'm really offended you didn't invite me to this Masquerade, vampires of the Shadow Blades."

"A blood-bag which tries to be funny... let's bleed her and-"

"Fulmen Gladius!"

The Vampiri Orientem had tried to get too close to her. As her wand became a sword of emerald lightning, this proved to be a very, very bad idea.

Once Alexandra had stabbed him with it, the tall and enormous bloodsucker who had been about twice as tall as she was died. It suddenly became a pyre of green flames and went to spread a lot of dusty remains on the grand red carpet.

"That wasn't very polite." Alexandra complained while removing her mask. And to her great displeasure, there were dozens of corpses on the side of the ballroom. The atmosphere reeked of blood saturated with something else. "Let me do the introductions again. I am-"

"We know who you are," an icy voice interrupted her at the other end of the ballroom. The vampire who had just spoken had some Roman Patrician look, and looked at Alexandra like she was a dinner who had suddenly developed the audacity to talk back. Which, when you thought about it, was not that far off the mark, given how many vampires had their fangs soaked with blood. The corpses lying in various places might hint that those vampires were no friends of humans either. "Alexandra Potter."

The absence of any honorific titles, mark of respect, and other things... clearly, it was a good sign violence had always been the way things would end. Well, there were other signs. The Gothic Masquerade had a considerable number of vampires in costume, yet the outrageous gowns looking like something out of the thirteenth or fourteenth century had a considerable amount of fluids on them, and clearly, they didn't belong to the Shadow Blades' members.

"Victor Aemillius, Coven Elder of the Shadow Blades, I presume."

There was no word of confirmation or denial, and the disguised vampires were unsheathing a respectable quantity of weapons, ranging from rapiers to flails and axes.

"I came here for negotiations."

"You came here to die," the vampire replied icily. "Alert has been given. An army of wererats and Vampiric Noctis is on its way to kill you."

Then there was a horrible series of screams and shrieks behind her... followed by loud and earth-shaking wolfish howling.

Lyudmila Romanov was really having fun, it seemed.

There were colossal explosions, and the recently rebuilt manor shook like its foundations had been heavily damaged. Damn, the Dark Queen was really battling them in an enthusiastic way...

"I fear," Alexandra replied sarcastically, "that an army is not enough to face my ally. You are on your own. So, let's negotiate. I have accords with several Covens-"

"No."

Once more, Victor Aemillius had interrupted her in a voice that sounded properly... inhuman.

So far, the description Peter Pettigrew had given her was perfectly accurate...

"You didn't even listen to a single point of what I wish to propose."

"You are a witch," the vampire looked at her like she was an insect. "There will be no accord, negotiation, or alliance with your kind for as long as I rule the Shadow Blades. You come here to insult me, and you think I would bend the knee in front of you? You, who haven't seen sixteen winters?"

Alexandra shrugged.

"Well, to tell the truth... the other Covens insisted I had to try. But as they say in Ravenclaw... in fact, I don't think they have a good proverb for it. So let me do the introductions again."

Alexandra changed her wand back to its normal appearance and saluted formally.

A vampire was stupid enough to try to jump on her from behind. A second later, the transformation of her hand ensured his head was separated from the rest of his body.

"I am Alexandra Potter, Champion of the Morrigan, and for today, your executioner, Shadow Blades. You have greatly offended Death, and your defiance is to come to an end. Submit... or die."

**21 February 1995, some distance away from the Headquarters of the Shadow Blades Coven, Nottingham**

Peter had expected a short and violent battle, one whose outcome would be resolved within one hour at most.

On this point, his professional estimate was more than verified.

Peter had not just expected how devastating it would be.

There had been explosions first. There had been screams.

This had been merely the prelude of something far, far worse.

Hundreds of wererats had transformed...but while at first it must have been to protect themselves, it had rapidly been a mad rush to flee and live another day.

It could have worked, against any opponent who had failed to properly encircle the Headquarters of the Shadow Blades Coven.

It didn't work when the opposition happened to be a gigantic wolf which seemed summoned out of the darkest of nightmares.

This was a beast which gave him the urge to transform and flee too.

Peter was a rat, Powers and Gods be damned. He wasn't supposed to be anywhere near- near *that*.

There were many squeaks and screams. Dozens of wererats threw themselves at the enormous magical wolf.

They were torn apart faster than you could describe it.

Many tried to flee. But the giant wolf seemed to have a sort of sensing ability, for it Apparated through shadows, and any giant rat which tried to escape was noticed and immediately slaughtered.

All the while Peter expected the Shadow Blades to come to the rescue of the skinchangers they controlled.

But then came... it became clear that the vampires were not racing to the rescue of the wererats.

No, they were fleeing, exactly like their servants.

Lightning burst into existence.

Emerald lightning came, and enormous heads filled with fangs exploded out of the manor, destroying most of it in the process.

This wasn't a battle anymore, assuming it was one in the first place.

It was just... it was just butchery.

Lightning and Darkness clashed. And then black fires began to burn.

Peter stopped watching after a while. Maybe it was cowardly of him, but there was only so much an average wizard like him could observe before emptying his stomach.

At least after a few minutes, it was over.

There were sirens shrieking in the distance.

Peter approached the manor, and did his best not to look too much at the corpses.

There were only two figures left standing.

One was in bright costume, but the hell-lupine smell was so potent no presentation was necessary.

Alexandra Potter, however, was naked, and soaked in gore and dark fluids.

"I thought you had finally figured how to transfigure your clothes, Death."

"Well, you were wrong. I'm just telling the Changelina to remove them before I transform."

There was an amused chuckle.

"Please find someone to teach it to you, then."

"That would be preferable...though I'm going to find some river to take a bath **in** before I return to Venice anyway. Accio!"

There were many holes in the former manor...one more was created as a long golden sword flew outside of it like a javelin and the Champion of Death caught it in her right hand without looking.

Then the green eyes turned towards him.

"Your information was exact. Nine o'clock, tomorrow, Ministry Atrium. Don't be late Mister Pettigrew."

"I won't..." if his voice trembled a bit, Peter didn't think anyone would blame him, surely. "Err... is that Victor Aemillius' sword?"

"It is." Alexandra Potter nodded. "Quite a remarkable blade...it managed to pierce one of my scales. And it was poisoned too."

The compliment would have been more impressive if the Hydra Animagus wasn't visibly unharmed and in perfect health...

"I really need a replacement blade, and this one will do until I have reforged Fragarach."

"Not that I want to interrupt, Death... but we should go. We haven't been very discreet... plenty of people are on their way to see what's wrong."

"The Soul Drinkers and the non-magical authorities were warned beforehand the vampiric problem was going to be handled. But sure, let's go. I have other things to do besides destroying a bloody Masquerade today..."

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

Alexandra was clearly just out of the shower when she entered the room House Sforza had placed at her disposal.

Susan didn't feel there was any reason to hide her amusement.

"Trying to compensate for the lack of swimming pools here?"

"Ha. Ha. Ha," her girlfriend replied. "I will have you know that I had a good reason to take this shower... and the two baths I took into a river before."

"And this good reason is?"

"Vampires stink." The Ravenclaw girl grumbled. "No let me rephrase that. Vampiri Orientem smell like carrion on a good day, and it wasn't a good day."

Susan felt like huffing.

"You really do intend to give more work to my aunt tomorrow, don't you?"

"Actually, Susan, she was extremely supportive of the move when we talked about it. I just had to... accelerate the schedule. Certain vampires believed that with the end of the Statute, everything was permitted."

"Hmm... and you took some trophies, I see."

There was a very long sword on the bed, one the Bones Heiress was pretty sure she had never seen before. For one thing, it was far larger and far longer than anything she had ever seen Alexandra wield during the Tournament or outside it.

"It was the sword of the Coven Elder," her girlfriend explained, trying to sound virtuous, and monumentally failing. "He didn't need it anymore, and while it isn't exactly a good match for me, I thought this would be a possible temporary replacement. I'm going to let Lady Zabini and other... experts have a look at it before using it, of course."

"Of course," Susan drily repeated. "And the little box next to it?"

Alexandra pouted and delicately took it before opening it... and presenting it.

For a moment, Susan was speechless.

"You stole a Blood Sapphire from the Shadow Blades?"

"Stealing is such an ugly word," Alexandra smiled, "besides most of the Vampire Coven has been permanently killed at this hour... so it can't be stealing if the owners are dead. Or well... their souls are dead for good this time."

"Alex... there aren't that many gemstones in the world..."

"I certainly would hope not, given that you need a Thaumaturgy Master, an Alchemist, and evidently an adequate sapphire to create one..."

Susan rolled her eyes. She had been the one to explain to Alexandra the importance of the Blood Gemstones, so seeing her words being repeated was really a poor joke.

"You know what I mean. It is worth a million Galleons, easily-"

"And it also incredibly increases the power of a Necromancer, provided the Blood Sapphire is correctly attuned to him... or her."

"No... I mean, yes, but I can't accept. This is too-"

This time it was the turn of the beautiful green eyes to roll and give her a childish playful tune.

"Nothing is too much for some things," Alexandra placed the box in her hands. "Besides, I didn't exactly pay for it, you know? I didn't empty a vault of gold and ruin myself. And besides, I have a payment in mind."

"Oh, and what is that?"

"I was so busy I didn't have the time to ask you formally to go to the Great Ball..."

Susan took two steps forwards and kissed her girlfriend.

"You didn't have to offer me a Blood Sapphire for that, Alex!" the red-haired Hufflepuff told her when their lips were separated again. "And yes, of course I would love to go to the Great Ball with you."

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

Alexandra was pretty sure she had asked her magical guardian for something 'not extravagant'. Twice.

It had been this morning, so she was reasonably sure it wasn't her memory playing tricks on her.

But the costume was definitely extravagant.

The dominant colour was, quite evidently, black.

But not the kind of black that had been used by Lucrezia for her 'Black Knight' costume.

The very fabric of the disguise seemed to be made of black opals and onyx.

Alexandra didn't know if they were true gemstones, and to be honest, she was a bit afraid to ask.

And yes, she was very aware of the irony of having offered a priceless gemstone to Susan one hour ago only to have something incredibly valuable as a costume now.

Though the gemstones – real or magically transfigured – were just the first extravagant part. The second was that they had been altered to look like scales, black scales.

Many Venetian costumes and other disguises seen during the Carnival were cumbersome and incredibly massive – for good reason in many cases, because it was still February and the weather was hardly summer-like.

Not this one.

Oh no, this one promised to be incredibly tight and espousing every curve and part of her body.

Add the lone scales of gold here and there, and it was incredibly obvious what the disguise was supposed to stand for.

It was a costume which revisited the myth of the Lernaean Hydra. The diadem which was going to go upon her head had two black diamonds and one emerald – could she say extravagant one more time? – but the obsidian accessory looked like nine snakes had been tied together, and of course the precious stones were in the maw of the Hydra. No doubt it would attract a lot of attention.

"Do I want to know what you prepared for Susan, Stella?"

"Of course, but first you will prepare," her magical guardian ordered. It certainly wasn't a suggestion. "We have only one hour to be ready."

One hour for most people was an eternity... but Alexandra wisely decided the smart thing here and now was to keep her mouth shut.

"Was Westminster satisfied by my little... detour?" the Champion of Ravenclaw asked while disrobing, throwing a glance to the incredibly graceful long gloves of black scales waiting for her metres away.

"They were," her guardian replied while bringing forwards a lot of powders and creams. "Satisfied and... impressed. Comparisons were made with a hurricane and a storm of lightning, I believe."

Alexandra snorted.

"I was very unhappy with the Shadow Blades. Seriously, two days, and they either transformed the people into wererats, or they bled them to death. But I gave them the opportunity to surrender. They seem to have believed they stood a chance."

"Please remember, Alexandra," the cloud of cosmetics was suddenly so dense it gave her the urge to cough, "that the last time everyone saw you fighting was on the Plaza di San Marco against Ra... and the abomination."

"I know," the young witch bit her lip. "Do you think the majority realised how terrifyingly powerful these two monsters were?"

"If the vocal report you sent me is any indication, the vampires certainly did not," the female Naga replied neutrally.

"Formidable," Alexandra sighed. "Do you think it is going to lead to more problems tomorrow?"

"I don't think so... you will have excellent arguments to convince some recalcitrant Lords and Ladies."

Alexandra rolled her shoulders.

"Too true." The Hydra Animagus decided to abandon the thought momentarily... and an idea she hadn't thought of before replaced it. "Speaking of Manors, Palaces and Balls... where is the Great Masked Ball supposed to take place? The Ducal Palace is impractical, I know it for having visited it several times... and House Sforza wouldn't invite thousands of people inside their ancestral home. So where are we, and by 'we' I mean all the Champions, supposed to dance for the delight of the European Magical Tournament?"

"As your guardian, I can tell you..."

"Yes?"

"It is a surprise," Stella Zabini finished with a carnivorous smile.

Alexandra groaned.

**21 February 1995, the former Palace of Ca'Luce, Venice**

Something to remember: when the Exchequer decided to settle a grudge once and for all, they didn't do it half-way.

To be fair, the Dark Wizards and Witches had had millennia of grudges to fulfil against Ra.

So it wasn't exactly a surprise to know that Morgane and all the Knights of the Exchequer had decided to raze Ca'Luce to its foundations.

Alexandra, honestly, was not that surprised.

Ra was hated by... by pretty much everyone sane, really.

What was more surprising, and gave a good hint as to how much the Exchequer wanted to spit on the Archmage's grave, was that they had successfully rebuilt a new palace in time for the Masked Ball tonight.

They couldn't have had more than forty-eight hours to do it, and yet it had been done. And it was not a small thing. Space-Expansion magic had been used on a prodigious scale, and now tens of thousands spectators could admire rows after rows of brand-new marble and bronze statues leading to the red and green-blue gates.

Oh, and yes, the entire decoration theme was the Fire facing the Sea; flames coexisting with the tides.

It was subtle, and not everyone would understand it, but the Champion of the Morrigan had no problem seeing through the fireworks and the subterfuge.

Once the Exchequer had removed the Light magic – and it was entirely gone, Alexandra couldn't feel a spark of it anymore – the Knights and the Queen had delivered their final insult: they had given the place to Fire and Water, much like the entire lagoon was already imbued with the two Powers' authority, as the circle of volcano fire encircled the magical waters.

What had been Ca'Luce would not be attuned to the Dark, as Ra must have feared... it had been judged unworthy of it. The last followers of the Army of Light, no matter where they hid, would undoubtedly grit their teeth when they heard of the humiliation.

Okay, this aside, the ceremony was grandiose and filled with splendour.

Susan and she had been given a tour by gondola in front of an entire city partying for the night – and in front of the Weasley Twins disguised as Cardinal's Guards for the evening, it must be noted – and when they made their entrance at the 'Palace of Masks', it was with a large orchestra playing Vivaldi's music.

Heralds announced 'the Countess of Lernaean' and the 'Countess of the Badger Pride', a tradition of anonymity obliged.

"I have a feeling everyone is looking at us, Alex."

"Only a feeling?" the Hydra Animagus joked. "Well, it must be your costume... oh great badger."

While her disguise had largely tried to imitate the scales of her inner animal, Susan's was doing its best to look like true black fur. But unlike hers, there was a lot more gold, for the style tried to imitate the stripes of Helga Hufflepuff's sigil.

"Thank you, Lady Hydra. Where do we begin?"

"I don't think we really have much of a choice... the new Mistresses of Venice want to speak with us."

The interior of the palace was sublime, it had to be said. The floor had been created to reflect the sea in fury, while the ceiling had been enchanted to show various mythological figures holding flames. Everywhere there were illusions of some of the most dangerous elemental forces in the world, and they were accompanied by the smell of the sea and cooked food.

And at the heart of this, Lucrezia Sforza and Fleur Delacour awaited.

If Susan and she had been... convinced... by Lady Zabini to go with an animal theme, so had the two stars of the evening. The Beauxbatons Champion had gone for a variant of the costume she had been using during the gondola race, a Phoenix of fire. Lucrezia Sforza had chosen a more conservative in appearance Jaguar costume...but only in appearance, for as usual the Succubus had not missed an opportunity to show everyone her body.

"We have arrived at an agreement," the Chosen of Water and Tlaloc told her once the courtesies were spoken. "The Champions who are not of the lagoon will have immunity for the Carnivals and the days of equinoxes and solstices."

A timing impeccable, really: the orchestra decided the moment was perfect to play Vivaldi's Four Seasons...

Alexandra made a theatrical sound.

"And here I thought you loved me, Lust," the Champion of Death hissed in fake despair. "I'm devastated."

"Should you say such a thing near your girlfriend?" the Succubus replied with amusement.

"A good point," Alexandra nodded immediately. "But my Countess of the Badger Pride will forgive me. I gave her a great present before our remarkable arrival here."

"I noticed," the other voice, needless to say, had no amusement or irony whatsoever. "You reek of blood, death, and sex."

If it had come from Lucrezia, Alexandra would have treated it in a rather unconcerned manner.

"Life and Fire..."

"Death."

Well, at least it was somewhat reassuring that after going through a flame inferno and being reborn, the currently red-haired Champion Alexandra had nearly killed during the First Task was continuing to be a colossal headache.

"I will abide by your rules while I visit Venice, don't worry." Then the Hydra Animagus bared her fangs. "As long as you live by mine outside, of course."

"If you think-"

"Oh, shut up, Phoenix, please. Yes, you are more powerful than ever, but with the help of the Dark Queen, we just exterminated the best part of a vampire coven today. In the interests of... how do the non-magical politicians say it? Ah yes, in the interests of peaceful coexistence, I propose we stay away from each other except when the fate of the world is at stake. It will be far better for everyone, and we Champions will be all the better for it. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Lucrezia replied while Delacour was still gaping. What? Did she think Alexandra was going to grovel and demand her forgiveness? If she hadn't bowed before Ra and Dumbledore, the Basilisk Slayer wasn't going to do it now, Fire or no Fire. She had bowed before Osiris, but the King of the Exchequer was gone. Death wouldn't bow any longer, end of the discussion.

"Now, my dear Countess, may I graciously propose a dance?" Alexandra asked as the orchestra began to play a waltz.

"Of course," Susan replied, and for many minutes, they decided to ignore the political problems swirling around them.

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Neville felt completely alone in the middle of these festivities.

The more he thought about it, the more the former King of the Day Court felt he would have preferred his grandmother commenting upon his huge mistakes one more time rather than come here. At least with the former... he may have learned how to correct some of his mistakes.

But there had been an invitation.

And while he was suspended for now, the rules were not going to tolerate any violation without good cause, which of course he didn't have.

He had donned the costume of the Lord of Lions – coming as the Day King would have been stupid.

And he was alone.

Most of the Hogwarts students were doing their best to avoid him. Half of them were polite, but after a few words they generally somehow found another person to speak to within ten seconds. And those he was able to exchange more than a few words with... they could be counted on both hands, and with spare fingers.

Moreover, one of those students had been Luna Lovegood, and Neville had realised too late that the rabbit-disguised Ravenclaw girl didn't want just to talk to him; she had wanted an interview for the infernal newspaper that was the *Loud Duck*. An interview Neville had made the mistake of giving her, though at least he had said nothing too damaging. Nothing that Hogwarts and the other students attending the Scuola Regina were aware of, at least.

But for a few minutes, the future Lord Longbottom hadn't been alone.

There were others he could speak to... assuming the former Champion of Fate wanted to speak to the crazy, that is. The Butcher of Dresden was here, for example. Yeah, Rincewind had returned... Neville wasn't going to call that maniac 'Professor'. The 'wizzard' had apparently played a big role in the evacuation and the elimination of several members of the Army of Light... and so he was invited tonight, with a mask that had a comically large nose, and some robes that were enchanted to be redder than a ripe tomato.

Speaking of former DADA teachers... Lockhart was here too. He had come in a purple peacock costume that was the talk of thousands of conversations. Neville was completely unsurprised. As for the man being another hero... no, in all likelihood Lockhart had just stolen someone's glory... again.

But it somehow hurt nonetheless, to see his year-mates were totally ignoring him. Neville turned his head and felt murderous emotions when he saw that Lavender was dancing in a flamingo costume with Draco Malfoy of all people!

For a second, Neville was speechless, then there was the urge to roar, to step forwards-

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you, Longbottom."

The adult-looking Gryffindor turned his head, and a witch he had rarely had the occasion to speak to was there, smirking. Daphne Greengrass of Slytherin... and for the Masked Ball, disguised as a Snake Queen of silver and green scales.

Neville for a second had the urge to ask if the Ice Queen of Hogwarts had asked Potter for a costume matching her Hydra gown, but given the expression of the Dark pureblood, thought better of it.

"I wasn't-"

"Don't lie, please," the Slytherin girl told him sternly. "And besides, it was just a dance. Malfoy did ask Padma Patil to be his partner for tonight."

As the music temporarily paused and couples separated on the dance floor, Neville could acknowledge Greengrass was right, Lavender was returning to discuss something with the Patil twins... who had come with rather beautiful Indian-themed costumes from their ancestral land.

Only then the words of the Slytherin were really assimilated.

"Wait a minute... Malfoy asked Padma Patil?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Daphne didn't smirk; of course the Ice Queen undoubtedly thought that sort of behaviour was beneath her. "They're in the same study group, and he's toned down massively on the arrogance and the 'wait until my father hears of this' rants. Since the beginning of this year, *dear Draco* has been far more tolerable."

The Heiress of House Greengrass paused and then struck like a viper.

"Unlike you."

Neville growled... both the Nemean Lion inside his chest and his own brain didn't like being insulted like this.

"What do you want, Greengrass?"

"I came to deliver two warnings, Longbottom. And please keep a more humble tone, if certain parties did not think you were an imbecile, your corpse would be eaten by the new magical fishes of this lagoon as we speak."

This was not a frosty tone... this was true venom, and suddenly Neville knew why Daphne Greengrass had been sorted into Slytherin besides her haughty pureblood faces.

"Warnings? From who? Potter?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Lion. No, it was Susan Bones who ordered me to transmit two messages."

"Oh?" If anything, Neville suddenly was more hopeful. Weren't Susan's parents members of the Order of the Phoenix? She was-

"Susan says that if you dare to play a part in something that will hurt House Bones or her girlfriend even once more, she will make sure to kill you and trap your soul in a phylactery for the next thousand years. That's the first warning, Longbottom."

"But- a phylactery is serious- that's Necromancy!"

The cold stare Neville received in return could have felt at home on a royal cobra.

"Second warning: there is a Wizengamot emergency meeting tomorrow. We know you have decided to attend. If you decide to be an idiot again, the fate of your dear friend Leo Black will sound like an amusing punishment compared to what you will endure in the aftermath."

"So the rumours were true, weren't they? You are going to usurp the powers of the Wizengamot and launch a Dark Reign with Amelia Bones as a figurehead?"

The glare of the Ice Queen forced him to take two steps back.

"At least I suppose you're completely ignorant of our true goals, and absolutely hopeless politically," the Slytherin girl mused. "I have delivered my warnings. Make the right choice, Longbottom... or don't. Personally, I would love to see you get exactly what you deserve after spending over a decade listening to the ridiculous tale of the Boy-Who-Lived."

The Heiress of House Greengrass left before he could react... and Neville found himself once again alone.

But this time, there was a massive amount of fear invading his thoughts in addition to the rest of his doubts.

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It was somehow strange to see Tracey Davis without Daphne, Alexandra had to admit.

But behind the blue-green mask, the cheerful personality was proof enough she wasn't dealing with an impostor.

"Having a good night, Tracey?"

"Oh yes," the Slytherin replied while sipping her drink. "I've had a dance with Blaise, I discussed several times prank Potions with the Twins... and I saw an Exiled Queen gape when she realised there were more ways to earn Tournament points before the Masked Ball was officially over!"

Tracey had never been big on self-control, and now she giggled.

"Yes, yes, laugh, oh cunning snake. Let me remind you I had other big preoccupations today. And honestly, I'm hardly the only one to have missed the opportunity. Not a single Champion bothered."

"That's still the first time you didn't play the game."

Alexandra changed her eyes into those of her inner animal just to give a more ironic stare at the other female student.

"Tracey, the Tournament had its fun moments, but there are now bigger things coming."

"By fun moments, do you mean-?"

"Yes, I mean inviting Susan to dance with me, you're not a very funny grass snake, you know."

"I will have you know, everyone in Slytherin thinks I'm joyful and the sunshine of the dungeon!"

Alexandra sighed. Loudly.

If something like that had been said, the Ravenclaw doubted it had been a compliment.

"Anyway. I am going to participate in the next Tasks, no matter how many of them there are, and I'm going to do my best to win. I've invested so many hours of studies and research to it, I might as well finish the job and bring the nice rewards home one last time."

"Plus there's the prestige. For the first time it will really be in front of non-magical spectators who know magic is real, right?"

For someone who was as hopeless in the political arena as the average Gryffindor, Tracey had made an excellent point.

"That was a factor, yes. Another reason why I did decide to continue... well, the contracts we signed didn't take into consideration the possibility of the Statute being broken." Knowing the Exchequer, it was not and never had been an oversight on their part. "If a Champion wishes to withdraw, he or she will have to pay the expensive financial fines that were agreed upon beforehand. I am not poor anymore, and I wish to stay that way, thank you very much."

"Very understandable!" Tracey then cheerfully changed the subject. "Oh, and who is in that butterfly costume? Is it Lyre? I don't think it was her theme."

"No, it's not Lyre... you have not met Scylla very often, didn't you?"

"Err... no," the brown-haired Slytherin admitted. "Is that going to change?"

Alexandra chuckled at the innocent question.

"Oh yes, I think you can safely bet this is going to change... We are going to change Britain tomorrow."

"We?" Tracey groaned. "Don't tell me I'm going to have to wake up early!"

"Sorry, oh lazy grass snake, but you will." Alexandra loved to hear the loud groans of disappointed Slytherins... "And after your alarm clock has suitably annoyed your ears, Daphne will give you your part of the plan. She told me you were going to like it!"

"That's absolutely not reassuring!" Tracey groaned pitifully.

"Well, I want to enjoy a last dance tonight! Ciao!"

The evening had been superb in fire and water themed spectacles and other illusions... best to end it with an amazing note... just to further enrage the tortured soul of Ra and enjoy her victory.

Death always had its due. And if the Army of Light's scattered remnants heard her thoughts... they could all go to Mordor for all she cared!

**Author's note**:

This time, the Venice Arc is well and truly over. Rejoice! For next chapter, we return to London...for a very eventful day.

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